



ROBINSON CRUSOE

Daniel Defoe



GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

Jonathan Swift



**ELEGY WRITTEN IN
A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD**

Thomas Gray



THE WAY OF THE WORLD

William Congreve

BEGC -108
BRITISH LITERATURE:
18th CENTURY

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The 18th Century is one of the most interesting periods in literary history- particularly in the case of British/ English literary history. Britain underwent various changes – socio- economically, politically, and existentially. These changes did not only influence life in Britain alone, but affected most of the literary world.

By the time we finish going through this course we will realise that we have looked at the development of:

- Prose fiction in the 18th Century as we study Daniel Defoe (1660-1731);
- Satire after reading about Swift (1667- 1745);
- Restoration Drama/ British Drama in the 18th Century as we study William Congreve (1670-1729); and
- Poetry after examining Thomas Gray (1716- 1771)

This course covers important writers such as Defoe, Congreve, Swift, and Gray, while Dryden, and Pope have been dealt with in the previous course BEGC 107: British Literature 17th & 18th centuries.

So without further ado let's jump right in and explore the 18th century. In this course therefore, we shall study 4 texts:

Block 1: **Daniel Defoe's** *Robinson Crusoe*

Block 2: **Jonathan Swift's** *Gulliver's Travels*

Block 3: **William Congreve's** *The Way of the World*, and

Block 4: **Thomas Gray's** *Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard*

BEGC -108
BRITISH LITERATURE:
18th CENTURY**Block****1****DANIEL DEFOE: *ROBINSON CRUSOE***

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Daniel Defoe has been celebrated as the father of the English novel and his most famous fictional narrative - *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) continues to be an integral component of the English literary repertoire as well as of western popular culture in general. In order to critically understand the significance of its popularity, we have to locate the novel concretely in its socio-historical and political context.

The four units of this Block obviously do not constitute an exhaustive representation of all the critical interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe*. But we have tried to incorporate discussions on the important aspects of the story so as to familiarise you with the author, the historical setting and the ideological politics of the novel. We have also included explanations of difficult words and concepts and complemented the analysis of the novel with relevant check your progress exercises so that you can simultaneously assess your understanding of the text.

The Units are as follows:

Unit 1: Daniel Defoe: Life and Works and *Robinson Crusoe*

Unit 2: *Robinson Crusoe*: An Analysis

Unit 3: *Robinson Crusoe*: Themes

Unit 4: *Robinson Crusoe*: Character Analysis

UNIT 1 DANIEL DEFOE: LIFE, WORKS AND ROBINSON CRUSOE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details of Daniel Defoe
- 1.3 Politico-historical Circumstances of 17th and 18th century England
- 1.4 Daniel Defoe- Life, Works and the English Novel
- 1.5 Summary of Robinson Crusoe
 - 1.5.1 Summary of the Preface
 - 1.5.2 Summary of the Story
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.8 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will familiarise you with Daniel Defoe, the man and the prolific writer who has been celebrated as the father of the English novel. It will also provide you with the political and historical milieu of 17th and 18th century England so that you can concretely locate Defoe in the annals of English literary history.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Situating Defoe in the political circumstances of his time will enable an informed understanding of the novel that apart from foregrounding some universal dilemmas of humankind, participates in some of the most intense political preoccupations in modern English history. Consequently, this novel is amenable to a multiplicity of readings and has been studied as an adventure story, a cautionary tale upholding Christian morality, a spiritual autobiography, a celebration of individualism, an imperial fable and so on and so forth. For a detailed understanding of the divergent possibilities embedded in the story, this unit will do a summarising of the novel so as to grasp the factors that shape the *bildungsroman* of the eponymous hero. Let us begin with the biographical details of Daniel Defoe.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF DANIEL DEFOE

Daniel Defoe was born in London in 1660 to James Foe, a fairly prosperous tallow chandler and, had a very chequered life trajectory owing to his peculiar circumstances and vocational pursuits - trader, writer, pamphleteer and intelligence agent. Since his father was a Dissenter from the Church of England, his station in life forbade Defoe from attending the traditionally elite schools of his time such as Oxford and Cambridge; instead, he attended Charles Morton's dissenting academy, where he studied Science and Humanities, preparing to become a Presbyterian minister. However, very soon he gave up on the plan to join the Presbyterian ministry and entered the burgeoning world of the trade and, by 1683 he had managed to set himself up as a merchant. He improvised at manifold commercial schemes and dealt with a variety of commodities, but kept failing

miserably and incurred bankruptcy often. In the next section, we shall examine the political historical circumstances of the 17th and 18th Centuries in England.

1.3 POLITICO - HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND

Apart from trying his luck in trade, Defoe also exhibited an active interest in the politically volatile circumstances of the 17th and 18th Century England and attained some notoriety as a polemical writer and also because of his status as a religious Dissenter. Defoe's year of birth coincided with Charles II's restoration to the throne where he served the mutually reinforcing roles of being both the king of England and the head of the newly reinstalled Church of England, much to the chagrin of the Dissenters. Protestant Dissenters, including the likes of Defoe's Presbyterian family, were forced to inhabit the peripheries of the reinstated regime and were unable to exercise their say in matters of public offices and policies. King and Parliament, stakeholders in governance ceaselessly struggled with one another for political clout. One of the first political pamphlets by Defoe was released in 1683 and vociferously expressed his politico-religious affiliation. The death of Charles II and the accession of his brother, James, to the throne in 1685, exacerbated an already combustible political situation. James II was a Roman Catholic and an ally of England's political rival - France. He was seen by his adversaries as embodying a danger not only to the Church of England but also to civil liberties, especially in a country that had just emerged out of a civil war (1642-1651) that was fought to safeguard those very liberties. By the fag end of 1688, James II was displaced by his nephew and son-in-law, William of Orange, in a progression of episodes labelled as the 'Glorious Revolution.' Like many of his fellowmen, Defoe, a passionate supporter of William III, became his leading pamphleteer and eulogised this revolution as championing the cause of the Protestant people of England against persecution and discrimination of religious minorities (Bullard 85).

However, after William III died, Defoe went through a series of setbacks and found himself constantly persecuted for being a Dissenter. Dissenters including Defoe were generally "Whigs" and the political tide once again turned against them when the "Tories" became more powerful after William III died. As a combative response to an ever-increasing aggressive Toryism, Defoe wrote "The Shortest Way with Dissenters," where he lampooned High Anglican extremism that culminated in his prosecution and brief imprisonment. After his release from jail, he was stuck in a public pillory for three days. Defoe was employed by subsequent ministries as a propagandist and sometimes even as a spy. His social and financial circumstances also compelled him to swear loyalty to the Tory party when he served as Queen Anne's pamphleteer. However, he continued to struggle financially and died of a stroke while trying to escape from an indefatigable creditor in 1731 (Keymer xi - xiii). The next section will examine his life and works in some detail.

1.4 DANIEL DEFOE – LIFE, WORKS AND THE ENGLISH NOVEL

By 1719, when his magnum opus, *Robinson Crusoe*, appeared, Defoe had spent about two decades of his active life writing pamphlets, periodicals and political tracts. The fictional narratives that went on to immortalise his name in the English literary canon were published broadly between 1719-1724. A series

of fictional narratives followed soon after *Robinson Crusoe*, including its sequels - *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and other works like *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Captain Singleton*, *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, *Journal of the Plague Year* and *Roxana*. These narratives consolidated his reputation as the progenitor of the English novel. In *The Rise of the Novel*, **Ian Watt** maps the development of a realist mode of writing in England as it happened during the 18th century in the fictional works of Daniel Defoe, **Samuel Richardson** and **Henry Fielding**.

The genre of the novel at around this time came to supplant the courtly form of romance, a narrative genre primarily obsessed with the ideals of chivalry. Romances were often written in an allegorical mode, dealt with idealised figures of knights and ladies and traced their fantastical expeditions in picturesque landscapes and were usually concerned with universal truths rather than the particularity of the experience. While courtly forms of literature necessitated a taste refined by education in classical learning and cultivated leisure, the novel came to be associated with the middle class and their aspirations and values that started assuming conspicuousness from the 18th century onwards. It is commonly accepted now that the development of the realist novel dovetailed with and latched onto the modern secular materialist understanding of "reality." Broadly, it can be said to be a form of fiction writing that renounced the magical and the outlandish and very self-consciously tried to attempt a faithful imitation of "social reality." The publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 therefore, became an extremely crucial event in the English literary aesthetics. Certainly there have been prose narratives before Defoe appeared on the literary scene, but this narrative is one of those first few fictional accounts that constantly drew attention to the authenticity of an individual's experiences and its narrative style urges the readers to believe in the "realism" it foregrounds by highlighting minute details.

However, the problem with definitions of "realism" is that one often tends to link this term with literary writings that are expected to contain an exact equivalence to a pre-given socio-political reality. It is crucial to be cognisant of the fact that "realist" novels do not and cannot possibly reproduce reality as it is. They can never mirror reality with complete faithfulness simply because any piece of writing has to consciously choose certain themes, select and arrange its narrative material, figure out the point of view, narrative voices etc. It is therefore, a highly complex process involving the ideological politics of the writer and must not be simply reduced to being understood as imitating some kind of an ossified reality/life. You should check your progress so far next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you think were the most intense political preoccupations of 17th and 18th century England?

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- 2) How do you think the historical circumstances of England impacted Daniel Defoe's writings?

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- 3) Do you think Daniel Defoe had to constantly negotiate with his circumstances because he was a dissenter from the Church of England?

- 4) Comment on the rise of the genre of the novel with respect to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*?

1.5 SUMMARY OF *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

In this section we shall quickly summarise *Robinson Crusoe* for you so that you get an idea of what we will be talking about. But, please note, this summary is in no way a substitute for your reading of the novel.

1.5.1 Summary of the Preface

An unnamed editor tries to elucidate his rationale for making the readers privy to the narrative that they are about to read in the following pages. He does not give away the name or story of *Robinson Crusoe* in a detailed manner but chooses to designate the narrative as a “private man’s adventures in the world.” An onus is put on the apparent realism inherent in the pages when he calls it a “just history of fact.” Adopting a very humble stance, he argues that it is unassuming, sincere and didactic in its style and instructs one to acknowledge and pay due respect to “the wisdom of Providence.” Thus, the editor reiterates that he is doing a tremendous service to the world in publishing *Crusoe*’s tale and rendering it accessible to many.

1.5.2 Summary of the Story

An Englishman hailing from the town of York in the seventeenth century, *Robinson Crusoe*, records his own life story. He is the youngest of the three sons of a fairly well-to do merchant of German origin. Highlighting the significance of the respectable “middle-station,” his father vehemently tries to argue and persuade him to study law and carve a financially and socially secure life for himself and not squander away the privileges he has inherited owing to his social position. Guilt-trapped into following the diktats of his father, *Crusoe* tries his best to fulfil his familial commitments and obligations. However, unable to suppress his longing for the open seas, he gives in to temptation and embarks on a ship bound for London on September 1, 1651 with one of his friends, much to the grief of his parents. His first sea journey is not exempt from hindrances and a violent storm drives him and his friend very near to death. *Crusoe* comes to see this storm as a divine warning that he should quit sea travel and his friend's father also dissuades him from sailing which again reminds him of his father's warnings. But *Crusoe* is not daunted by this and establishes himself as a successful merchant on a ship

leaving from London. He makes a fortune as a merchant and immediately plans another voyage after making a widow the custodian of his newly acquired wealth.

The second voyage turns out to be disastrous as his ship is besieged by the Moorish pirates and Crusoe is captured and made a slave in the North African town of Salée. When out fishing, Crusoe and another slave boy, Xury, manage to free themselves from the clutches of their captors and sail away. A good natured Portuguese captain helps them out, takes them to Brazil and expresses a desire to buy Xury from Crusoe. After some moral dilemma, Crusoe agrees to sell him on the condition that the captain will set him free after ten years. The sojourn in Brazil proves to be financially successful for Crusoe as he sets himself up as a tobacco plantation owner.

Motivated by this success and the profit that he earns, Crusoe becomes restless and longs to procure black slaves and sails on a slave-gathering expedition to West Africa. However, things do not go as per plan and he ends up shipwrecked and miserable on the coast of Trinidad. Crusoe soon realises that he is the sole survivor of the shipwreck and after pondering over the warnings of his father and earnest pleas of his mother not to go sailing, Crusoe slowly but steadily comes to terms with his current situation. He undergoes an emotional turmoil and after experiencing intense grief and despair, reaches a state of reconciliation and acceptance. Soon this acceptance transforms into gratitude to God for having saved his life and he becomes determined to start his life afresh and he actively seeks food and shelter to survive and sustain himself on the island. He exhibits a lot of resourcefulness and makes twelve trips to the wreck's remains to secure guns, food and other items that can prove useful to him. Scared of savages, Crusoe perseveres to build himself a "fortress."

On the shore, he discovers goats that could provide him with sustenance. He erects a cross and carves it with the date of his arrival on the island, September 1, 1659, and makes a notch every day so that in the absence of anything to record time, he does not get lost in a sea of chronological confusion. He also regularly maintains a journal where he records his daily activities, both his struggles and achievements and serendipitous moments - candle-making, accidental discovery of sprouting grains, his building of a cellar and many such episodes.

In June 1660, Crusoe takes ill and in a state of hallucination believes that an angel visits him and goads him to repent. While drinking tobacco-steeped rum, Crusoe has an epiphany and comes to believe that his soul has been purified and God has delivered him from his former sins. He devotedly starts reading the New Testament that he finds in the wreck and sees his island experience not as a punishment but as a kind of deliverance from his erstwhile life where he has sinned. After convalescing, he maps the area and does a survey. Much to his joy, he comes upon a cornucopian valley where he builds a shady retreat for himself. He experiences a surge of positivity and optimism at the prospect of being on the island and proclaims himself as its "King." Soon after this, his ink runs out and he is compelled to discontinue the habit of writing in his journal. He trains a pet parrot, adopts a goat as his pet and cultivates his skills in a variety of tasks - basket-weaving, bread-making and pottery. After cutting down a gigantic cedar tree, he makes a big canoe from its wood, but realises that it is not viable as he cannot take it to the sea. So he builds himself a smaller boat and sails around the island but narrowly escapes drowning when his boat is tossed by a forceful wave. On reaching his side of the shore, he is comforted by the sound of his pet parrot calling out his name and once again he expresses his gratitude to God for sparing his life. He becomes skilled in animal-husbandry and is quite elated with

his "absolute command" over all the subjects of his little kingdom on the island and excitedly provides the readers with an inventory of his possessions on the island which includes his two homes, the "fortress" and the "country seat," grape valley, agricultural lands and enclosures for the grazing of his cattle.

His slow-paced rhythms of life characterised by occasional eureka moments and hard work continues for several years without any disruptions. This blissful existence is broken one day when Crusoe is horrified to come upon a man's footprint on the island. Initially he assumes the footprint to be that of a devil but then he soon realises that it must belong to one of the cannibals who he believes resides close by. This episode sends shivers down his spine and he arms himself and becomes very vigilant. He herds his goats at night in the underground cellar that he has built and also figures out a way to do cooking underground. He starts entertaining thoughts of ambushing the savages but then another dilemma starts plaguing him. He questions his authority to pass judgement on their practices and then decides that he will only intervene and attack them if provoked to do so. He takes many steps to avoid being discovered or seen by the cannibals.

While reading the Bible one day, he hears gunshots and the next day he witnesses a ship wrecked on his coast but on investigation, he finds that the men on it are either dead or gone. He rummages through the ship and realises that it is Spanish and manages to find some ruined provisions and clothing, gold bars etc. Once again he expresses gratitude to the almighty for sparing his life.

Crusoe becomes preoccupied with thoughts of leaving the island and wonders about what might have happened had he heeded his father's warnings and never left home or had he been satisfied with the profit of the tobacco plantations in Brazil. He believes he would have been living a good life now. He starts feeling guilty again for not having been content with whatever he had and wanting more. However, he soon finds out that the island is scattered with dead human bodies which resemble the aftermath of a cannibal feast. His terror knows no bounds and he continues being circumspect. Soon after, he witnesses a group of thirty cannibals heading for the shore with their victims. One of the victims who is about to be slaughtered, manages to flee and seeks shelter in Crusoe's home. Crusoe guards him and slays and injures some of the cannibals and eventually defeats most of them.

As a gesture of gratitude for saving him and granting him liberation from his captors, the victim promises total submission to Crusoe and vows to serve him selflessly. Crusoe gives him the name, Friday, to solemnise the day on which he was rescued. Since Friday exhibits eagerness to please and learn from Crusoe, he teaches him a few English words and some fundamental Christian tenets. Friday explains that the cannibals are categorised into distinct groups and that they only consume the flesh of their enemies. He also apprises Crusoe of the fact that the cannibals are responsible for rescuing the men from the shipwreck that Crusoe encountered earlier and those men, the Spaniards, are residing in close proximity among the natives. Friday once expresses a wish to return to his people but the idea of losing Friday, his new found companion on the otherwise deserted island, makes Crusoe unhappy. Crusoe decides to visit the Spaniards and Friday also admits that he cannot bear the thought of losing Crusoe and decides to build a boat with Crusoe to visit the land of the cannibals'. But before they manage to depart, they are shocked to discover the arrival of twenty-one cannibals in canoes. The cannibals have three victims in their custody and one of them is prima facie a European distinguishable because of his attire. Crusoe and Friday manage to kill most of the cannibals and secure the release of the captives. Friday is euphoric

to realise that one of the rescued victims is his father. The other rescued man is a Spaniard. All of them retire to Crusoe's dwelling for food and shelter. Crusoe makes provisions to welcome them into his community.

Later, he sends Friday and his father to survey and explore the island nearby. Their slow-paced existence is once again disrupted when they encounter an approaching English ship. This terrifies Friday and makes Crusoe cautious. Eleven men from that ship take three prisoners onshore in a boat. Nine of them go on an exploring expedition of the area while two of them stay back to watch over the prisoners. Using their wits and muscular strength, Friday and Crusoe manage to subdue these men and secure the release of the prisoners, one of whom is the captain of the ship, which had been seized through a mutiny. Eventually Crusoe and Friday confront the rest of the mutineers. Crusoe agrees to spare their lives on the condition that the ringleader, Will Atkins, pays the price for the mutiny. These mutineers then surrender and Crusoe and the rescued captain devise schemes and regain control over the ship. Crusoe and the captain pretend that the island is an imperial territory and that the Governor has granted their lives so that they may be sent back to England for due processing. Retaining five men as hostages, Crusoe orders the other men to seize the ship. The captain expresses gratefulness and gratitude to Crusoe for helping him retrieve his besieged ship and gives him many gifts. He also offers to take him and Friday back to England.

On December 19, 1686, Crusoe embarks on the ship departing for England. Some of the mutinous crewmen are abandoned on the island. On arrival in England, Crusoe realises that in his absence there, his widow friend has kept his money safe and he has become a very prosperous man. However, he finds out that all his family members have passed away except for his two sisters. He then travels to Lisbon to enquire about his business affairs. The Portuguese captain apprises him of the fact that his plantations in Brazil have been highly profitable. He arranges to sell his Brazilian lands. Suspicious of sea journey, Crusoe endeavours to return to England by land but is hindered by unfavourable weather and wild animals in northern Spain. On reaching England, he is informed that the sale of plantations has earned him quite a fortune. Crusoe again starts experiencing the pangs of travel and decides to pacify his desire by returning to Brazil, but the prospect of having to convert to Catholicism acts as a deterrent. He marries, and has three children. However, his wife dies soon after. Crusoe leaves for the East Indies as a trader in 1694 and revisits his island, and finds out that the island is being administered quite efficiently and has become a flourishing colony.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What role do you think the preface plays in setting the tone of the story?

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- 2) Explain the significance of the ordeals at sea in the story.

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- 3) Comment on the development of the character of Robinson Crusoe in the story.

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- 4) What role does Christian morality play in the unfolding of the story?

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- 5) Comment on the development of the character of Friday in the story.

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- 6) Crusoe is constantly trying to master his circumstances. What do you think is the relevance of this to the plotline?

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- 7) What do you think is the significance of repentance and self-awareness in the trajectory of Crusoe's character?

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- 8) What purpose does Crusoe's journal serve?

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- 9) What is the importance of the island setting in the story?

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10) Comment on Crusoe's daily struggles on the island.

Daniel Defoe: Life and Works
and *Robinson Crusoe*

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a discussion of Defoe's biographical circumstances and how he negotiated with them to carve a niche for himself in the world of writing. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to co-relate the specific circumstances of Defoe's life to those of the historical and political turmoil of 17th and 18th Century England that would enable us to understand the larger context of the changing literary aesthetics. This led to an understanding of the significance of the founding of the genre of the novel by Defoe and its ramifications for the representation of "reality." Apart from these, we tried summarising the story with the intention of closely reading the narrative so that we are equipped with the textual framework to critically analyse it in the next unit and are in a position to connect the inside world of the text to the extra-textual sources.

1.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The divide between the Whigs and the Tories. The rivalries between Catholicism and Protestantism. The succession debate, fight between monarchy and parliament.
2. When Defoe appeared on the literary scene, the society of England was undergoing a transition, especially with the loosening up of the feudal order and the rise of middle-classes. The changing social scenario also demanded a change in literary aesthetics and Defoe capitalised on this and wrote a series of fictional narratives in a "realist" mode with close attention to minute details and authenticity of experiences.
3. Defoe often found himself victimised and discriminated against owing to his religious affiliations.

Being a minority made him susceptible to persecution and he had to carefully manoeuvre his way around. Circumstances compelled him to swear loyalty to the Tory party though he did not fully identify with their manifesto.

4. The rise of the middle-classes and the consolidation of their sensibilities significantly transformed the literary aesthetics. The rhetorical excesses and allegorical modes of romances did not coincide with the change in societal structures and privileging of merit over inheritance. The novel as a genre of writing, for instance, *Robinson Crusoe*, catered to these demands as its narrative often concerned itself with the bildungsroman of a protagonist who is concretely located in a specific time and place and who carves a niche for himself after trials and tribulations in a "realist" manner.

Check Your Progress 2

1. It introduces the style of narration which inaugurated the genre of the novel. Focuses on faithful representation of "reality." Even though an extraordinary story of adventures, the language is bereft of rhetorical excesses.

2. Creates thrill and adrenaline rush for the readers as they follow the adventures of Crusoe. Ordeals at sea can symbolically stand for the punishment that Crusoe has to endure for disobeying his father given the biblical resonances of Adam disobeying God and having to suffer its consequences. Contributes to the moral framework of the novel.
3. From seeing himself as a miserable castaway, he starts to think of himself as the King of the island. From having the feeling of getting punished to seeing the sojourn on the island as an act of divine blessing. Lot of emphasis on individualism and work ethic. Exhibits imperialist tendencies. Occasionally finds slavery problematic but justifies it for economic gains.
4. Very didactic framework. Constantly harks back to Adam's disobedience to God to throw light on Crusoe's disobedience to his father. Religious epiphanies provide comfort to Crusoe in times of distress. Violent storms symbolically imply divine warnings. Crusoe's daily routine and emphasis on work ethic are modelled on the tenets of Protestantism.
5. Provides companionship to Crusoe. Very hierarchical relationship. Assumes superiority of white races morally, culturally and politically. Friday exhibits the servile dependence expected out of a colonised native by the white coloniser.
6. Highlights the imperialist tendencies in Crusoe because he is always mapping, surveying the land so as to strategically become its lord and master. His individualistic ethos is tied to his racist notions and desire to master his circumstances. They also betray his mindset of imposing control and order as he deems fit.
7. The Christian morality framework is highlighted where sin leads to punishment but true repentance can lead to divine mercy. Nascent foregrounding of the inner workings of human mind which later go on to become one of the striking features of a "Realist Novel"
8. Recording of information helps Crusoe to get a sense of chronological clarity and order. Since his recording of his day in the journal is obviously characterised by his subjectivity, this helps us to understand the importance of point of view and how representation of "reality" is always coloured by bias of inclusion and exclusion by the narrator.
9. Serves as a laboratory to test the human dilemmas, for instance, Crusoe contemplates whether he has the authority to judge the customs of those he designate as cannibals. The island also represents the European colonial expansion, for instance, Crusoe often envisages himself as the "King" of the island. Crusoe's sojourn on the island celebrates middle-class sensibility that places a lot of merit on the ability of an individual to change the course of life by "choosing" wisely and working hard for it.
10. His daily struggles and toiling represent the Protestant work ethic. Crusoe's daily struggles and overcoming them emphasise the merit that the novel places on the spirit of individualism and the idea of a self-made man that was gaining a lot of popularity in the 18th century especially in the backdrop of rise of capitalism. These struggles can also be seen as a part of the didactic framework where Crusoe is shown to inculcate the values of thrift, perseverance and piety through experiential learning.

1.8 GLOSSARY

- Bildungsroman:*** A novel which deals with the formative years of the main character especially focussing on his/her moral and psychological maturation.
- Eponymous:*** Something or someone named after a particular person or an entity.
- Dissenter:*** This term refers to a number of Protestant denominations – Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and Congregationalists, who due to their refusal to conform to the teachings of the Church of England in the 17th century, were subjected to persecutions under a variety of discriminatory acts and policies.
- Whig and Tory:*** 'Whig' and 'Tory' were members of two opposing political factions in England, particularly during the 18th century and the terms had assumed a lot of currency since the volatile conflict over the bill to exclude James, duke of York (afterward James II), from the succession. The nomenclature 'Whigs' came to imply Scottish Presbyterians and connoted nonconformity and rebellion and was applied to those who asserted their right to exclude the heir from the throne. 'Tory' was an Irish term implying a papist outlaw and was applied to those who endorsed the hereditary right of James despite his Roman Catholic faith.

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UNIT 2 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Critical Analysis
 - 2.2.1 Part I
 - 2.2.2 Part II
 - 2.2.3 Part III
 - 2.2.4 Part IV
- 2.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.5 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the significance of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in the English literary canon by critically locating it in its historical moment of production, dissemination and reception. We will deal with the critical analysis of the novel and look at what it means to be able to critique something properly. By carefully avoiding the twin perils of anachronistic and reductive readings, we will try to wade through a sea of critical material available so as to comprehend this text.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We will try and deconstruct the mythologisation of *Robinson Crusoe* and analyse how it continues to dominate literary and popular imagination even now. For Defoe, as for his most memorable protagonist, Crusoe, theological postulates emanating from the Protestant-Christian framework have formed the bedrock of his political ideology. For a detailed understanding of the importance of Crusoe's proverbial restlessness and individualism, this unit will analyse the text and will study it vis-a-vis the rise of capitalism and bourgeois ideology. This unit will also critically scrutinise the themes of colonialism and exploitation of the natives that have been embedded in the story.

2.2 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

We will be looking at the novel critically and have divided the novel into four parts to facilitate our understanding of it.

2.2.1 Part I

Daniel Defoe was most probably inspired to write *Robinson Crusoe* after having read an account of a man named Alexander Selkirk, who after a fight with his crewmen had marooned himself on a deserted island. When realisation prevails upon him about the repercussions of his actions, he implores his shipmates to rescue him, but it is too late by then. Consequently, he is compelled by circumstances to suffer four and a half years on the island and the chronicles of his adventures became quite popular and were widely published in England. Crusoe's adventures and survival tactics on the island have some parallels with Selkirk's account but Defoe also enriched the narrative by incorporating many

pressing socio-political and cultural debates of the time. As Richard Braverman (pp. 1-5), rightly points out - the initial few pages of Robinson Crusoe's story deal with questions concerning power relations, ownership and lawfulness. Robinson Crusoe is the youngest son and his two elder brothers have died/gone missing and therefore are unable to exercise their rights on the father's lands under primogeniture. Crusoe's father has been a successful merchant in the past and now leads a relatively genteel life and has managed to buy for himself a small estate that he now desires to bequeath to Robinson Crusoe. But Crusoe refuses to accept this inheritance and instead desires to seek wealth on his own in a much different pursuit. Crusoe's rejection of paternal authority also works as an analogy for the political crisis of the succession debate in England and the Jacobite rebellion that divided people into opposite camps of Tories and Whigs. It is possible to analyse that the overthrow of monarchic absolutism and the restriction of sovereign authority in England generated the historical background for Defoe's novel which deals with filial disobedience and Crusoe's eventual assertion of his political will on the island.

The rejection of paternal authority continues to haunt Crusoe for the rest of his life, beginning with the episode when his first sea travel goes horribly wrong and he views it as divine punishment. But after having survived his first misadventure, he forgets his promises to his father and embarks on more adventures which leads to his capture by the Moors and his subsequent enslavement. According to the dominant understanding, the narrative progression of Crusoe powerfully foregrounds "the misery that follows the breach of filial duty" but it also demonstrates that this moral lesson can be "commonly overlooked, when the curiosity of the mind is strongly excited, and the feelings powerfully engaged, by the circumstances of the story" (Trimmer 298-99). Crusoe's acquisitive and materialistic tendencies have been referred to briefly in the episode when he successfully manages to transform forty pounds into a three hundred pound profit. In fact, this episode prefigures later when to acquire more slaves for his plantations, he undertakes the voyage that culminates in his isolation on the island and forms the major portion of the story. When Crusoe plots with the young Maresco, and Xury, to escape from their enslavement, we notice his resourcefulness and strategising which comes to the forefront. But, this again, foreshadows his survival tactics on the island. His manipulation, subjugation and selling of Xury reveals Crusoe's inherent white supremacist ideologies and also foretells the terms and conditions of Crusoe's relationship with Friday.

All these episodes highlight Crusoe's materialistic ambitions as he procures more land and earns more profit. He becomes cognisant of the fact that he is now close to attaining the "middle station of life" which his father had very vehemently instructed him to aspire for back at home. As Crusoe tastes material success, he starts regretting the fact that he has sold off Xury, not because of emotional affinity but because he would have been useful as a slave. The moment he has the means, he wastes no time in getting himself a slave to work for him. Ever desirous to acquire more wealth, he once again courts danger by planning to go to Africa to buy slaves for his plantations. Robinson Crusoe has been primarily studied under two broad categories. Firstly, as a narrative tracing the trajectory of the consolidation of middle-class sensibilities, secondly, it has been read as a text that helped to mould and disseminate attitudes towards the non-European population which eventually laid the foundation for colonialism in the 18th century. Even though Crusoe is disgusted by the brutality of the slave masters, he never really interrogates the lawfulness of the institution. On the contrary, he thinks

that slavery has become inextricably intertwined with rising British commerce and trade (Todd 150). Let us now move on to analysing Part II of the novel.

2.2.2 Part II

As **Thomas M Kavanagh** rightly argues, "Robinson Crusoe is emblematic of those characteristics identified with the modern novel: the centering of the story in character, the emergence of the novelistic persona as a realistic psychological presence, the changing relationship of a secular to a religious basis of consciousness and a concern with the structure and temporality of narration" (416). Crusoe's trepidation on finding himself alone on the island, to his efficient transformation of the island as well as overcoming those whom he perceives to be his enemies, in a sense, plays out the tensions that were inherent in early 18th century Europe, that was grappling with the emergent modern secular understanding of the universe against, the erstwhile, equally powerful backdrop of a deeply religious framework and was trying to make sense of the modern world. We have already read about what was happening in Europe in BEGC 107, Block 2, Unit 1.

Coming back to *Robinson Crusoe*, there is no physical presence of a guardian on the island, but the all pervasive providential framework fulfils this role. In fact, the island episode becomes a tightrope walk involving the balancing of the individualistic ethos and self-reliance celebrated by the rise of middle-class sensibilities and repentance for the rejection of paternal authority. As the influential critic, **J Paul Hunter**, demonstrates, Crusoe often seems to contemplate his sojourn on the island as following the biblical footsteps of **Jonah**, **Job** and the prodigal son, supposedly far removed from any identification with contemporary tropes. But this pose of a *tabula rasa* comes across as a carefully cultivated stratagem. A plethora of travel books that were popular in the 18th century also necessitated certain horizons of expectations that Defoe had to satisfy. So, for all the novelty and the originality of the narrative, Crusoe participates in an already established textual tradition - stormy seas, pirates, money exchanges, unpredictable sea voyages, trade and commerce etc (6-7).

Crusoe is initially bewildered about his security on the island, but soon jumps to the conclusion that what really haunts him is a sense of a lack of order. Crusoe's island slowly comes to resemble Eden from the Bible. In the Bible, God had placed Adam in Eden "to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Following a similar rationale, Crusoe realises that if the bounties of God are not ameliorated by human labour then they will remain futile and unproductive. So when he decides to maintain a journal, he starts to gain a sense of clarity and coherence. He establishes his legitimacy and dominion over the island through his perseverance and active ordering of space rather than only depending on divine intervention. In fact, through labour, he transforms the barren island into a productive estate. In Defoe's time it was a commonly held assumption that God actively monitored all the processes of nature and sometimes intervened to reward or punish people. But this line of thought encountered challenges in the late 17th century when scientific explanations became more pronounced. When Crusoe witnesses barley growing outside his hut, he initially sees it as a miraculous event and links it to divine intervention. But then suddenly recalls that he had thrown out a bag of seeds and understands this episode to be a favourable result of a logical cause and effect sequence. His resourcefulness and ingenuity on the island and the precision with which he records his daily chores are described by **Watt** as the "distinctive technical features of modern capitalism." As the critic, **Christopher Hill** also contends that Crusoe's island sojourn seems to be a paragon of Protestant and bourgeois value systems premised upon hard work, disciplined routine and

self-monitoring. He observes the Sabbath as a non-working day and regularly expresses gratitude to God for sparing his life. For him, Protestantism gets complemented by prudent business ethics (7).

Crusoe endeavours to carve a familiar space for himself on an alien island and is almost compelled by circumstances to also master the art of house-keeping that includes tasks such as, home-brewing, basket-making, pottery making, and bread-making. So while it has become proverbial to identify Crusoe with a sense of restlessness and a spirit of adventure, the other side of his island experience includes his desire to manufacture a simulacrum of a normative British life, especially in those episodes where Crusoe describes his dinner scenes with his "little family" which includes a parrot, a dog and two cats. Though often described as a capitalist entrepreneur, when Crusoe goes to rescue provisions from the shipwreck, his efforts also closely resemble an efficient management of the home with available resources. So while he comes across as a proto-capitalist sometimes, paying attention to his sojourn on the island also reveals his efforts to domesticate the island in the image of a comfortable middle-class existence. As Crusoe begins experimenting with the tools accessible on the island, he also starts behaving like a member of the gentry. His most famous accomplishments on the island include his rudimentary styled goat-skin garments, umbrella and his attempt to build a boat. Apart from these, he masters animal husbandry and with effective management creates a well-maintained garden and decorates his country retreat with a double hedge. His efforts to create a comfortable and pruned space for himself resemble the practices that were actively being carried out in the estates of 18th century England (Rogers 49-65). Before we move on to Part III, let us stop briefly and do a brief check on what we have learnt and understood so far.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What role do you think the theme of paternal disobedience plays in the plot of Robinson Crusoe?

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- 2) Critically comment on Crusoe's sojourn on the island.

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- 3) Do you think the story tries to accommodate these competing claims - the spirit of individualism on one hand and deference to authority figures on the other?

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- 4) What is the significance of Crusoe's meticulous house-keeping on the island to the plot of the narrative?

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2.2.3 Part III

One of the preliminary reactions to *Robinson Crusoe* as an imperial fable is predicated on the fact that his imposition of order symbolises the quintessential masculinist and imperial drive to go out into non-European lands and dominate them to bolster one's selfhood through an act of racial "Othering." As the critic **Dennis Todd**, rightly foregrounds, that, when Crusoe realises the intensity of his predicament on the first day on the island, he surveys the area from a high vantage point and then fires the gun. This of course goes on to become the proverbial moment of colonialism in literary texts as it symbolises the coloniser's attempts of mapping and mastering of the land (142-43). **Edward Said** has also demonstrated in *Culture and Imperialism*, that colonialism and the rise of the realism in novels are deeply intertwined and Robinson Crusoe inhabits a crucial space in this shared history. **Firdouz Azim** in *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, argues that the realistic novel is premised upon the construction of a European subjectivity that derives impetus from the domination of the colonial Other. A whole body of postcolonial criticism has understood Crusoe as a paragon of European colonialism constantly preoccupied with acts of identifying, mapping, charting and geographically mastering the "New World" by uprooting its native population. Crusoe has a very paternalistic attitude towards Friday especially when he teaches him English, familiarises him with domestic chores like baking, followed by instructing him about the elementary aspects of Christianity. By re-casting a colonial enterprise in such domestic terms, it creates a semblance of a benign mission bereft of the purely economic motivations that triggered them initially. As the critic, Dennis Todd rightly highlights - "Crusoe's progress on the island reads like a prospectus for British colonial activity and expansion - he settles, builds, plants crops and herds livestock; he faces down a hostile indigenous population; when the island is peopled, he replicates the orderly, hierarchical society of home. Like the New World for British colonists, the island for Crusoe is not only his for taking but a blank slate on which he can recreate the world he had come from" (143).

Crusoe seems to harbour absolutely no compunctions at having to make Friday his subordinate and colonising his identity. In fact, Crusoe seems to be vastly ignorant of the huge burden of Britain's imperial projects that the natives had to bear. As **Peter Hulme** has contended - the novel is a "paradigmatic fable" about "the primary stuff of colonial ideology", "the encounter between civilisation and savagery." It is also important to understand that though Defoe has been largely an endorser of Britain's colonial missions the novel itself, does not glorify colonialism in a straightforward manner. In fact, it is possible to look at the ruptures that have opened up by recuperating alternative possibilities from the margins of the text. The 17th century Puritan diktats expected an introspective analysis of the self so as to effectively monitor the mind through the virtuous application of reason. Crusoe's extensive self-introspection often provides avenues to rethink some of the basic prior assumptions about colonialism. For instance, he actually wonders if he has the prerogative to pass judgements on the customs of those he has designated as "cannibals."

The subjugation of natives of non-European lands was often justified on the grounds of their supposed cannibalism. Crusoe rethinks this and wonders whether people should be demonised for doing something that does not seem unjust to their ethos. Similarly, on close interaction with Friday, he realises that Friday is not the "savage" he thought him to be, on the contrary, he is capable of deep warmth and affection. While this rethinking surely does not exonerate Crusoe from his racist, paternalistic attitude, but given the context of the early 18th century, the novel surely provides spaces to re-assess Britain's dominant ideology regarding imperialism. Having said that, it is also important to understand that Robinson Crusoe is not an anti-slavery tract! Friday functions like a *tabula rasa* for Crusoe upon which he imposes his will. As the critic, **Richard Braverman** argues that Friday becomes Crusoe's metaphoric and political son that allows him to reproduce and transmit his acquired power (4-5). We are now reaching the end of the analysis of the novel, so let's move on to Part IV next.

2.2.4 Part IV

As **Carl Fisher** argues - "far from being an ideal, isolation was an imposed state. Crusoe accumulates because that is both a means to an end and an imbedded principle. He controls what he can of the environment, and does his best to foresee problems ahead. He stays as sane as he can, under the circumstances, but his longing for companionship and community is constant. The tension that the narrative creates, of the isolated human, both within and against the environment, of the desire for the agency in the world, of the evocation of the survival instinct, does not require the island isolation of Robinson Crusoe, but the narrative resonates because it encouraged identification with the striving impulse that typified the age" (101).

The spiritual angle of Crusoe's trials and tribulations achieves its peak when he finally reaps the rewards. He discovers that his fortunes have miraculously increased manifold and are almost equivalent to a divine blessing - manna from heaven. Keeping the Protestant framework of the story intact, we are made to believe that Crusoe sees this bounty as a compensation for his willingness to endure hardships, especially when he draws a comparison of himself to Job "I might well say now, indeed, that the latter end of Job was better than the beginning" (239). Crusoe's daily routine and emphasis on the work ethic are modelled on the tenets of Protestantism, specifically with its thrust on inculcation of the values of thrift, perseverance and piety through experiential learning. In the concluding chapters also, he highlights his Protestant-Christian affiliation by mentioning twice that he does not desire to go to Brazil because that would entail his proselytisation into Catholicism. Consequently, Crusoe transforms his tale of survival into a divine endorsement of his particular faith.

The colonial aspects of the story also become pronounced in the closure of the novel. Crusoe genuinely believes that he is helping Friday to ascend the ladder of civilisation by familiarising him with the English culture and letting him serve him. While negotiating with hostile mutineers and outwitting them, Crusoe and the captain terrify them by referring to a fictional "governor" of the island who will penalise them harshly for their rebellious ways. This fictional governor prefigures the very real governor with legal powers who will eventually administer the island with an iron hand, since Crusoe has anyway seemingly mapped and colonised the territory for England. After Crusoe returns to the island, the flourishing community life is a very visible presence there. The Eurocentric ideals of victoriously bringing the merits of "civilization" to a barren and undeveloped terrain is foreground in this story through the transformation of the island over

the course of years, foreshadowing the fate of many similar imperial enterprises. In fact, Crusoe distinctly designates this community as “my new colony in the island,” which makes us realise the inextricably intertwined relationship between mapping and mastering a territory.

The last chapters also compel readers to re-assess Crusoe's strategically arranged escape from the island. Even though Crusoe has been nostalgically longing to return to England, ever since he set foot on the island, it is ironic that when he finally manages to get off the island, the return to a prosperous sedentary British existence seems paradoxically unfulfilling to Crusoe's inherent restless nature. After having braved the stormy seas and the most elemental existence on the island, one might believe that the familiarity of European topography and cultural milieu would grant him some peace and bliss. *Au contraire*, in Spain, Crusoe faces unfavourable weather and wild animals. Strangely, his island with its shady retreat appears way more gratifying when juxtaposed with his journey to Spain. His sojourn on the island is frequently peppered with almost a primordial longing for companionship and emotional affinity till Friday makes an appearance and satisfies that craving for company to some extent. For all the familiarity that Europe holds for Crusoe, on returning, human society there does not seem to hold any deep attraction for him. The widow who has overseen his wealth and the Portuguese captain who supervised his plantation are courteous and have certainly proved to be immensely helpful, but somehow we feel they do not offer him the happiness that he seeks. When Crusoe finally gets married in England and fathers three children, he seems so emotionally distanced from his wife that, he does not even bother to tell us her name. It is very peculiar and a matter of deep concern that we are told absolutely nothing of the woman, Crusoe marries, and, that the women he ships to the island are only as significant as the other "supplies." The presence of women is conspicuous in the story by their virtual absence. Women are only briefly mentioned and given the overarching utilitarian logic in the novel - women exist for the sole purpose of being useful to the men involved.

In a nutshell, with “no family” and “not many relations,” and with negligible desire to form new relationships, Crusoe comes across almost as solitary in England as he does on his island. This ending also provides the readers with an opportunity to speculate and interrogate the worth of the return to "civilization" that Crusoe always thought he desired. Though the story is obsessed with the binaries of "self" and "Other" and "civilized" and "savage," but careful scrutiny reveals that for all the reinforcement of these dichotomous divisions of humanity, it is also possible to cull out moments and episodes from the novel, no matter how precarious that, foreground the unease with these watertight compartmentalisations.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How does the progression of the narrative try to balance the contradictory claims of a spiritual autobiography and a tale of adventure?

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- 2) How does Crusoe's treatment of Friday reflect the master-slave relationship between the coloniser and the native?

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- 3) How does the novel foreground that cultural colonisation and geographical conquering go hand in hand?

- 4) Critically comment on the binarisation of the "savage" and the "civilized." Does the story also blur this rigid binarisation sometimes?

2.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has put under critical scrutiny, the story of *Robinson Crusoe* by trying to link its textual content with extra-textual sources and socio-cultural and politico-religious debates of 17th and 18th Century England. An attempt has been made to familiarise you with the spiritual framework of the novel and foreground how the didactic impulses of the story are aimed at a consolidation of the Protestant work ethic and reinforcement of bourgeois morality.

Delving deeper into the trajectory of Crusoe's character helps us to understand how the novel also functions as a manual for European colonisers and the racial profiling of the native population. We also tried to understand that there are episodes/moments in the story, no matter how fleeting, where the eponymous protagonist tries to re-think the fundamental postulates of white supremacist ideologies, but of course never takes this rumination to their logical conclusion. These very ruptures and fissures enrich the complexity of the narrative and make it amenable to a multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives.

2.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. It makes the plotline serve the purpose of a cautionary tale. It helps readers draw parallels with the Biblical Adam. The idea of repentance for paternal disobedience ensures that the domestic harmony is not completely destabilised in the wake of ambition.
2. It functions as a rule-book for colonialism. His isolation on the island gives him an opportunity to atone for his sin of paternal disobedience. Crusoe demonstrates his inherited white supremacist ideologies in his dealings with non-whites.
3. Yes, because on the one hand the story celebrates Crusoe's pursuit of his passion, on the other hand, he is also suitably chastised for disobeying his father and rejecting domestic stability for his personal ambitions and

aspirations. It is possible to see that the resolution of the plot tries to achieve a precarious equilibrium - valorisation of a self-realised man while also ensuring that social structures are not radically restructured to make way for his desires.

4. In a novel, which primarily deals with masculine ambitions and male-bonding, Crusoe's house-keeping on the island introduces the conventionally cherished feminine virtues in the story. His resource management skills also help him convert a remote island into a more homely space that eventually comes to somewhat resemble his life back in England.

Check Your Progress 2

1. On the one hand the story increasingly resonates with Biblical episodes, thereby imparting moral lessons and preaching piety, thrift and self-discipline. For instance, Crusoe is perpetually haunted by the thought that he has disobeyed his father and he will have to pay the price for his disobedience.

On the other hand, the story follows the reckless adventures of Crusoe as he keeps going on sea voyages, surviving alone on a remote island, fighting cannibals, negotiating with mutineers etc. In fact the novel ends on a note promising more adventures in the pipeline.

2. Crusoe exhibits white supremacist tendencies throughout the novel and especially in his interaction with Friday. Crusoe thinks he is doing Friday a favour by familiarising him with western culture and Christianity, just like the colonisers assumed that it was their moral responsibility to bring civilisation and enlightenment to the lands that they have conquered for monetary gain.
3. When Crusoe finds himself marooned on an island, he wastes no time in mapping the area, mastering the flora and fauna and harnessing their productivity to his advantage. Simultaneously, he reconfigures the island by imposing order on it as he deems fit and slowly and steadily, after pruning and preening, it starts resembling a western establishment. In fact, Crusoe often calls himself the king of the island. His interaction with Friday also shows how he has culturally colonised Friday and made him an efficient partner cum slave in maintaining control over the geographical terrain of the island.
4. The story by and large maintains the binaries of the "savage" and the "civilized" and foregrounds that the west connotes reason, enlightenment, morality while the non-whites connote barbarity, violence, immorality, lack of emotion etc. For instance, Crusoe harbours no guilt at the prospect of slaving expeditions; in fact he actively participates in them.

But the novel also provides us with moments, when these binaries are momentarily rendered unstable. For instance, on closely interacting with Friday, Crusoe realises that a lot of his stereotypical assumptions about him are proved false. However, the storyline never takes these blurring of binaries to their logical conclusion.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Anachronism: A chronological error or attribution of a wrong date/period to a person or an event.

Reductive Reading: A reading that does not appreciate the narrative's multiple

themes/ perspectives and instead obsesses over a single aspect of the story thereby, producing a biased understanding.

Mythologisation: To make something/someone into a myth by endowing it with heroic or exaggerated qualities.

Bourgeois ideology: The social classes - professionals, manufacturers, merchants, that became influential during Industrial Revolution and whose concerns are primarily related to the preservation of their economic supremacy and "respectability" in society.

Protestant Work Ethic: This is a work ethic that places a lot of value on hard work, self-discipline, thriftiness and links worldly success and eternal salvation.

Primogeniture: A type of inheritance that generally, legally privileges the right of the eldest son to ancestral/family estate.

White Supremacy: A belief system that argues that white people are inherently superior - be it culturally, socially, politically or economically to other races and therefore have the mandate to be the dominant group in any society.

Tabula Rasa: A blank slate, something/someone existing undisturbed in its supposed pure state.

Othering: A process of perceiving someone/something as distinctly different/ unfamiliar in relation to "self."

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UNIT 3 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: THEMES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Thematic Analysis
 - 3.2.1 Filial Disobedience
 - 3.2.2 Island
 - 3.2.3 Colonialism
 - 3.2.4 Civilisation Versus Savagery
 - 3.2.5 Individualism
 - 3.2.6 *Tabula Rasa*
 - 3.2.7 *Robinsonades*
- 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.5 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will help you navigate the labyrinthine trails of *Robinson Crusoe* by discussing in detail the broad themes that Defoe has carefully woven in the fabric of the tale. By drawing attention to the themes in the text and associating them with the socio-historical context of England, the idea is to foreground how generic conventions cross-pollinate with the socio-political conditions of their time and consequently become fluid in their narrative possibilities.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The thematic aspects of any text do not exist in isolation but are interdependent and often overlap with each other, thereby endowing that text with a sense of multi-dimensionality. It is imperative to understand that the meaning of a text does not simply reside in the story itself, but is shaped by the reader in relation to the text in question and also the complex web of other texts and references, direct and indirect, involved in the process of reading it. Keeping this framework in mind, this unit will critically scrutinise the different themes and motifs that shape the story of Robinson Crusoe in their own peculiar ways. So let's begin by looking at the various themes that this novel deals with next.

3.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

What is a theme?

In a very broad sense, themes could be looked at as content or ideas that run through the fabric of the novel. Themes arise from the interplay of the various aspects of the novel such as, the plot setting, character, sometimes the element of conflict and the aspect of tone (under style). If we were to analyse the meaning of theme very simplistically we could say that, the theme of a piece of fiction novel is its views about life and about how people behave. The theme of a novel particularly these days is rarely didactic/ moralistic- in fact, most of the time it is not even presented directly. We locate the theme with the help of the characters, the action and the setting of the novel. In short what we really do is to try and

figure out or work out the themes ourselves. The novelist merely communicates his/ her message to the reader and it is up to the reader or us to decipher what the theme is. However, it is important to point out here that every idea a novel may seek to present does not necessarily develop into its theme. An idea becomes a theme only when it recurs through a novel in such a way as to demonstrate a novelist's preoccupation with it. A novelist often reveals his/her concern or preoccupation with a theme or a set of themes in several different ways, some of which are as follows:

- i) Indirectly through the medium of character/characters, as a character is widely held to be the chief vehicle of an idea or ideas in a novel.
- ii) Indirectly through certain patterns of imagery and symbolism that run through a novel.
- iii) Indirectly through key words or phrases that find a recurrent expression in a novel.
- iv) Directly through authorial comments that lie interspersed in a novel, where a novelist takes the liberty to comment on either the characters or situations or both.
- v) Through the title.
- vi) Through allusions that are made throughout the novel
- vii) Through details and particulars in the novel and the greater meaning that those details could contain. (BEGE 108: Reading the Novel, Aspects of the Novel, Block I, Unit 3, p. 39)

We have identified seven thematic strands in *Robinson Crusoe* and will now move on to discussing each in some detail. You should try and see if you can locate any there themes in the novel. The first theme that we take up for analysis is that of filial disobedience.

3.2.1 Filial Disobedience

The perennial fascination that the figure of Robinson Crusoe holds in the western imagination is also increasingly tied to the overt biblical framework of the story. In spite of having all the tropes and paraphernalia of a full-fledged adventure story that gives great doses of adrenaline rush to the readers, it also functions as a didactic tale that reinforces conventional Christian morality. In fact, the homiletic message is outlined in the Preface itself, which categorically delineates that Crusoe's story is being made available so as to enlighten the masses about God's wisdom and the need to repent for one's sins. The primordial sin in the western imagination is Adam's disobedience of God's command and partaking of the forbidden fruit. Similarly, Crusoe's father repeatedly counsels him about the merits of "the middle station" of life and forbids him to go on sea voyages. But like Adam, Crusoe does not resist the temptation to taste the forbidden fruit and goes sailing, much to the chagrin of his father. Even though Crusoe acknowledges the bounties of God and continuously expresses gratitude for having been spared his life when he loses all his shipmates to a shipwreck, it is never enough till he actively atones for his sins. In order to lead a truly fulfilling life, Crusoe needs to repent, something that he learns from the angel that visits him during the state of pyretic hallucination. It gets ingrained in Crusoe's consciousness that his biggest sin is his defiant behaviour towards his father, which continues to haunt him and makes his heart heavy. He designates it as his "original sin," analogous to Adam's first disobedience of God's command. This overarching biblical theme

also suggests that Crusoe's sojourn on the island, isolated from friends and family and having to toil hard for bare sustenance is reminiscent of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the idyllic life of Eden.

Atonement for Crusoe is premised upon admitting his deficiencies and his complete dependence on and subservience to divine authority. This newly-acquired knowledge coupled with a heightened sense of self-awareness propels Crusoe's spiritual awakening and he feels that he has had a rebirth. Though the old pessimism often comes back to haunt him, but he becomes relatively resigned to his fate and starts viewing his life on the island as an enabling and positive experience. When he is finally rescued and his fortunes have increased phenomenally, he draws parallels between his fate and that of Job Book who was also eventually rewarded for his patience. Paradoxically, the urgency of repentance ends up justifying sin. Crusoe would not have realised the importance of repentance if he had never committed the sin in the first place - filial disobedience. Thus, as powerful as the theme of filial disobedience is in the story, it is present in a nuanced manner and complicates the readers' response to notions of sin, repentance and redemption. Let us look at the next theme which is of the island.

3.2.2 Island

The island episodes are very crucial to the plot of *Robinson Crusoe* and provide good opportunities to test out some of the dilemmas and anxieties that plagued 17th and 18th century western imagination. Crusoe undergoes various trials and tribulations for the rejection of his father's wishes and spends a good deal of time on the island repenting for his filial disobedience. Interestingly, his stay on the island also grants him the chance to refurbish not only his surroundings but also his own existence and he goes on to become the self-made man valorised by the then emerging middle-class sensibilities. He starts afresh, seemingly removed from the burdens of modern living - something that holds a deep fascination for the readers even now and this has also helped in transforming the story of a shipwrecked person into a modern myth.

Later on, the island setting of *Robinson Crusoe* also coincides perfectly with the Romantic notions of childhood as a distinct world characterised by an inexhaustible reservoir of yet to be unleashed potential. Some historians and sociologists propose that this tendency by adults to indulge in watertight compartmentalisation of childhood and adulthood is prevalent even now and they designate it as "islanding." This term stands for the attempts by adults to isolate children from the territory of adult experiences and paint a very idyllic picture of childhood. In its role of an adventure tale which also at times serves the purpose of a cautionary tale, Crusoe's story again reinforces the need to "island" the young from the big, bad world outside. In spite of Crusoe's admirable resourcefulness and survival tactics, he does suffer for disobeying his father and often views his shipwreck and isolation on the island as divine retribution for his prodigal ways (Malley 16-18). So the anxieties caused by Crusoe's individualism and threat to parental authority are also to some extent eased by the eventual recognition of providential framework and need for atonement while he is marooned on the island.

The site of the island again, works as a metaphor for colonisation because Crusoe actively maps the island and imposes order on it as he deems appropriate. In fact, the island sojourn, subjugation of Friday and his productive labour there function as a manual for mastering and claiming an alien land as one's own and that too by taking a moral high ground. So, we may conclude that the island serves multiple

purposes in the progression of the narrative and accordingly shapes the readers' response to the story. Let us look at colonialism as the third theme.

3.2.3 Colonialism

Robinson Crusoe has been hailed and celebrated for espousing a modern, western individualism premised upon a somewhat omnipotent and omniscient subjectivity i.e. a belief system that gives man some control and agency to determine his life trajectory. However, Crusoe's aspirations also make him the ambassador for the 18th and 19th century's imperialist ambitions of Britain. While on the one hand, his sojourn on the island is seen as a punishment for rejecting paternal authority, on the other hand, the island also affords him the opportunity for the socio-cultural and geographical colonisation of non-European lands. It is true that to some extent Crusoe realises the relativity of cultural norms in his interaction with non-whites, but by and large he continues to carry and act according to his deep-seated white supremacist ideologies. Once Crusoe realises he is the sole survivor on a remote island, after the shipwreck, he wastes no time in mastering his physical surroundings and harnessing them to his advantage. Just like, he loses no time in imposing his socio-cultural and religious teachings on Friday as if Friday was a blank slate waiting for edification. The novel is directly and indirectly celebrating Britain's colonial projects for non-Europeans, for the island functions like a clean slate which Crusoe can claim and re-make by imposing the socio-cultural and economic set-up he approves of.

However, Crusoe's obsessive ruminations often provide avenues to critically re-assess the ideological impulses underlying the colonial enterprise. These are crucial moments and as readers we must pay special attention to them because the novel along with celebrating colonialism, also offers a mild critique of Britain's colonial ventures. For instance, Crusoe contemplates whether he has the right to pass value judgements on the socio-cultural practices of the community which is different from his - "cannibals." Crusoe is at times genuinely moved by Friday's ability to express and experience affection and warmth and momentarily, the lines between "civilisation" and "savagery" are blurred. Having said that, it is also significant to take into account that Crusoe is never really able to break free completely from the racist stereotypical assumptions and continues to treat Friday as a lesser human being. The next theme under study is that of the nation of civilisation versus savagery.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Critically comment on the importance of repentance for the resolution of the plot of *Robinson Crusoe*.

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- 2) What are the multiple purposes served by Crusoe's sojourn on the island?

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- 3) What are the repercussions of drawing parallels between Robinson Crusoe and Adam?

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- 4) What role do white supremacist ideologies play in the unfolding of the narrative?

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3.2.4 Civilisation Versus Savagery

Crusoe expresses an irrepressible longing for a companion while he is marooned on the island. But when he befriends Friday, he analyses his gratitude and remarks in a very self-satisfying manner that Friday "made all the signs to me of Subjection, Servitude and Submission" (Defoe 174). For Crusoe, he embodies "civilisation" and Friday exhibits "savagery," therefore, it becomes his moral obligation to enlighten Friday about the normatives of western cultural environment and religion.

Many passages in the story disrupt the neatly constructed hierarchies predicated on the supposed moral difference between Europeans and the Caribbean people. During one crucial moment, Crusoe wonders whether the priests of the *Spanish Inquisition* will turn out to be more brutal than the people he designates as "savages." Also, when Friday mistakes the English mutineers to be potential cannibals, the hierarchies are momentarily destabilised. Sometimes Crusoe's response to the institution of slavery, especially in his interaction with Friday highlights how the novel does have nascent self-awareness of the exploitation and unfairness inherent in using fellow human beings as slaves. But he deploys the services of slaves on his Brazilian plantation and goes on three expeditions to hunt for slaves. Crusoe might not admit it explicitly but it is actually his slaving expedition that culminates into his solitary confinement on the remote island, far away from his familiar world. He never really questions the legitimacy of such institutionalised exploitation and does not see it as anything abnormal. Even when he thinks of the sins he has committed and seeks mercy, he never really expresses any compunction for having acquired wealth through slavery. When he expresses regret for selling Xury into slavery, it is purely for practical purposes because he would have proven to be helpful on his plantations for making more money. Of course, Crusoe's attitude towards slavery cannot be judged as per our contemporary parameters of human justice, because the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* precedes the abolitionist movement and an indisputable argument against slavery does not make an appearance in the print form till the 18th century (Keymer xxxvi -xxxvii). But Crusoe seems to have naturalised these racial hierarchies in his mind and cannot envisage an economic system that is bereft of the exploitation of human beings, stereotyped as "savages."

So, though it is possible to retrieve occasional incidents from the novel which destabilise the rigid division of human beings in watertight compartments of races,

but by and large, the plot of *Robinson Crusoe* lays the foundation for imposition of the western way of living on the non-European lands and harnessing the productivity of the natives for the economic gain of the west. Let us look at the theme of individualism next.

3.2.5 Individualism

Many critics and scholars have read *Robinson Crusoe* as a tract celebrating the rising influence of bourgeoisie. Crusoe's ingenuity and tale of endurance under extremely testing circumstances coupled with his monetary accomplishments made him the poster boy of the upcoming middle-class ethos and of the capitalist economy of which this class was to become both the instrument and the main recipient. **Ian Watt** argues that the quintessence of Crusoe's individualism is grounded in his isolation from his familiar community life and structured practices and established traditions. This breaking away from his moors, relinquishment of inheritance and following his passion and making a fortune after toiling hard endows Crusoe's journey with a relatively modern secular materialist understanding of life (60-62).

However, the rising influence of individualism also triggered new kinds of anxieties and tensions especially with reference to the stability of societal structures both at the microcosmic (domestic harmony) and macrocosmic level (the larger public sphere). In the novel, while Crusoe embodies the virtues cherished by the upcoming middle-class sensibilities - independence and self-sufficiency, his waywardness and free-spiritedness also pose a threat to the stability of familial order and social establishments. Therefore, these traits have to be constantly monitored and suitably penalised so that his individualistic personality is well-integrated with that of society and his aspirations and desires do not exist at loggerheads with the greater good and the grand scheme of things. For instance, Crusoe undergoes suffering for rejecting paternal authority and domestic comfort. Even on the island, he spends a lot of time making an alien land into a familiarly ordered space by practising meticulous house-keeping. Therefore, we may conclude by arguing that on one hand, the novel jubilantly welcomes individualism, on the other hand, it also foregrounds the uneasiness that individualistic pursuit creates and how it must be efficiently tamed and domesticated, if need be. The notion of *tabula rasa* needs to be examined next.

3.2.6 Tabula Rasa

The notion of *tabula rasa* makes repeated appearances in the plotline of *Robinson Crusoe* and trying to make sense of the socio-cultural significance of it is very integral for a comprehensive understanding of the text. As the critic, **Malley**, argues that this text has been considered very suitable by eminent western theorists for educating children so that they go on to become socially aware and integrated members of society (23-24). *Robinson Crusoe* has often been seen as the universal representative of humankind, someone every reader could identify themselves with, apparently. By placing Crusoe on a solitary island and making him lead an elementary existence, Defoe seems to provide a laboratory for testing out basic human instincts. It is because of this universalisation of his *bildungsroman* in the repertoire of western culture, that he has been appropriated by adults for pedagogical purposes for amelioration and divertissement of children especially by the 18th century educationists. **John Gill** contends that childhood is "modern society's myth of both origins and destiny, our explanation of who we are and what we will become" (33). The notion of childhood as the carrier of yet untapped potential has been most articulately argued by the 18th century theorists

in their concern for streamlining curriculum for children's education. *Richard Barney* very cogently shows that *Robinson Crusoe* follows very closely what Barney designates as John Locke's "supervisory" model of education specified in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1694) that speaks of the infant mind as a *tabula rasa* awaiting edification (15). The critic **Samuel Pickering** has also demonstrated that "after the shipwreck he resembled Locke's infant with a mind like a blank tablet or empty cabinet" (60). But it is also imperative to understand that while Crusoe does lead a life removed from civilisational trappings on a remote island, he eventually re-makes it to resemble his home back in England. So he does not actually break away from what he considers a relatively familiar zone, in fact, he replicates it as much as he could given the limited resources.

Crusoe also treats Friday as a *tabula rasa* on which he freely imposes western and Christian learning. However, it is important to remember that this tendency of Crusoe to treat Friday as a blank slate, underlines his intellectual, social and moral superiority because he absolutely negates Friday's ideologies and belief systems by indoctrinating him with ideas and concepts that he deems suitable. By treating Friday as bereft of any cultural or moral systems, Crusoe severely infantilises him and renders him incapable to go about his life without his guide and counsel. Therefore, we can conclude that the notion of *tabula rasa* that was very popular in the theories of 17th and 18th century has been dominantly read in a very problematic manner in *Robinson Crusoe* because everyone, be it Crusoe on a remote island or Friday after he is rescued, carries traces of socio-cultural, political and emotional baggage and these continue to influence who they are and negating these do not make them go away. What is *Robinsonades*? We shall look at it next.

3.2.7 *Robinsonades*

The roaring success of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* and its translation into virtually every written language has led to the creation of a literary sub-genre called the 'Robinsonade.' This term was conceived in 1731 by **Johann Gottfried Schnabel** in the preface to his own robinsonade, *Die Insel Felsenburg* (*Felsenburg Island*), to designate an increasing body of narratives loosely modelled on the tropes inspired by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. These stories usually involve shipwrecks, adventure tales or survival tactics of Europeans in isolated locales. It is important to understand that no text exists in a void and Defoe drew onto a variety of sources to enrich the story of *Robinson Crusoe* - travel narratives, accounts of pirates, spiritual autobiography, political pamphlets etc. As a consequence, these were embedded narrative possibilities play out in an imaginative manner in the many re-interpretations of Crusoe's story (Fisher 98-99). By the 19th century, this genre was commonly identified with adventure narratives catering to male adolescents. These stories reiterate the masculinist normatives of aggressive ambition, mastering of circumstances and colonial conquests. The critic, **Martin Green** argues that the robinsonade tradition is "profoundly masculinist, both in its character's indifference to women, and in the stimulus it gave men to find fulfilment exclusively in bonds to other men" (36). Ironically, along with facing strenuous situations and mind-numbing ordeals, this sub-genre also represents how these male protagonists carve a homely space for themselves amidst unfamiliar locales. Consequently, conventionally feminine practices of house-keeping and domesticity also become an integral aspect of the narrative trajectory. This genre, despite having the overarching backdrop of an adventure tale also contains the seemingly contradictory ideals of home and domesticity (Malley 48-58). By the 18th century, writers also started to experiment with the solitary female Crusoe

type of protagonists, though the female castaway stories were not as popular as those of their male counterparts. **Michel Tournier's** *Friday* (1977) and **J M Coetzee's** *Foe* (1986) are two of the most influential postcolonial revaluations of the original story especially with respect to the character portrayal of Friday.

More than any other piece of literary fiction, *Robinson Crusoe* has generated phenomenal interest among audiences, cutting across socio-economic strata. Consequently, the story has been translated and transcreated in multiple formats and mediums and has been very liberally incorporated in our popular culture. Immediately after its publication, heavily edited chapbook versions retaining the rudimentary plotline of the original narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* had flooded Britain and America. In 1781, **Richard Sheridan** produced a pantomime stage adaptation of Crusoe's journey and it opened to such tremendous reviews that it not only became a staple for decades to follow but also gained a reputation for being the paragon of the English Christmas pantomime performances well into the twentieth century. The celebration of the thematic thrust of Crusoe's story has also registered its presence in the world of music, for instance, "*Where did Robinson Crusoe go with Friday on a Saturday Night*" was performed by **Al Jolson** in the former half of the twentieth century. There has been a plethora of cinematic adaptations of Crusoe's bildungsroman ranging from the most burlesque like *Lt. Robinson Crusoe, U.S.N* (1966), to the faithful version like *Luis Bunuel's Robinson Crusoe* (1954). Contemporary popular television shows like "*Survivor*" (2000) and "*Lost*" (2004-2010) also owe their success to the resonance of Crusoe's narrative in our socio-cultural parlance (Malley 1-3). These imaginative reinventions of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* help us understand the original narrative from many different points of view and simultaneously critique and pay homage to the popularity of the genre.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In what ways does the novel celebrate individualism?
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- 2) How does the dichotomy of "civilisation" and "savagery" work in the relationship between Crusoe and Friday?
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- 3) Do you think Friday is literally a blank slate/tabula rasa before he meets Crusoe?
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- 4) What does the increasing popularity of the sub-genre of Robinsonade specify about Robinson Crusoe?

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3.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to engage with the important thematic aspects of *Robinson Crusoe* by highlighting their socio-political relevance for the time frame in which the story is situated. A detailed analysis of how the story closely revolves around notions of colonialism, binaries of "civilisation" and "savagery," the rising middle-class and individualism has been done. An attempt has been made to help you understand the reasons for the popularity of the story in dominant western imagination even today. We have also tried to comprehend the reasons and repercussions for giving the advancement of Crusoe's journey an aura of universality, even though the narrative constantly draws attention to the specificity of its spatio-temporal location. No text exists in a vacuum. All narratives exist in a reciprocal relation with the texts gone by and anticipate the texts about to come, it is a kind of open-ended intellectual enterprise. This is absolutely befitting for *Robinson Crusoe* because it has founded a new sub-genre of writing that is still flourishing, 4 centuries after Defoe had published the novel.

3.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The notion of repentance connects the story of Robinson Crusoe with the Biblical Adam. It helps in introducing a didactic purpose to the resolution of the plot. The transgressive tendencies exhibited by Crusoe owing to the pursuit of his passion are tamed and domesticated. Consequently, the threat posed by his individualistic streak to the familial structure, domestic harmony and the larger social establishments are suitably eased.
2. Serves as a quintessential locale to experiment and examine the human behavioural tendencies in the most elemental circumstances. The island also gives Crusoe an opportunity to achieve the ideals associated with middle-class sensibilities - self-reliance and resourcefulness. It also helps him repent for his sin of filial disobedience especially the excessive manual labour that he has to do to sustain himself there. The island also provides Crusoe with an opportunity to culturally and geographically colonize the non-European territory and govern it as per western normatives.
3. It gives a spiritual dimension to the trajectory of Crusoe's life and makes it much more universal in its appeal. The Biblical framework also makes the story more didactic in scope as like Adam, Crusoe also paid the price for disobedience of God/father's command. It also makes Crusoe's imperialistic ventures relatively less problematic as everything is eventually subsumed under a divine framework.
4. Crusoe is extremely racist in his dealings with Xury as he does not suffer from any guilt for having sold him into slavery. He often goes on slaving expeditions. His behaviour with Friday is also very hierarchical in nature.

The plotline seems to be endorsing Crusoe's imperial ventures and he resembles a proto-imperialist when he is marooned on the remote island.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The entire novel charts the trajectory of how Crusoe rejected the wealth he inherited from his father and went on to pursue his passion. Crusoe's sojourn on the island helps him become the self-realised human being cherished by the 18th century middle-class sensibilities. In the end, Crusoe is rewarded for his toil and enduring spirit when he discovers that he has made a lot of money on his plantations and his savings have also increased manifold.
2. Friday connotes irrationality, wildness, gullibility, lack of emotion for Crusoe. On befriending him, some of Crusoe's prejudiced expectations are corrected and he comes to appreciate Friday. But by and large, their relationship remains very hierarchical in nature as Crusoe never treats Friday as his equal.
3. No, Friday is not a blank slate. He has his own belief system and notion of polity and religion. It is Crusoe's white supremacist attitude that makes him think that Friday must be exposed to western ideologies and Christianity so that he becomes relatively more compatible to live with Crusoe.
4. Since Robinson Crusoe is a very multidimensional text, it has been read from so many perspectives. These multiple narrative possibilities that are interwoven in the text make it very amenable to adaptation in different forms and versions, be it a cautionary tale or self-reflexive parody of the original story. Therefore, the story can speak to audiences/readers across generations in a variety of contexts and formats.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Biblical Adam:

According to the creation myth in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, Adam was the first man. He along with the first woman, Eve, were placed in the garden of Eden by God. Adam and Eve were told that they could eat from all trees in the garden except the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." One day Satan, the fallen angel, comes in the disguise of a serpent and tempts Eve to taste the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Eve partakes of the fruit and also persuades Adam to have it. For their disobedience of God's command, they are expelled from Eden and are forced to toil to sustain themselves.

Romantic:

The Romantic period (approximately between 1798-1832) was characterised by major socio-political and cultural transformations, especially in England, due to Industrialization, Agricultural Revolution and the French Revolution. Economically, the Industrial Revolution and the Agricultural Revolution had severely altered the landscapes of England through depopulation of country sides and creation of overcrowded cities dotted with factories and mills. Politically and socially, the French Revolution accompanied by the toppling of monarchy was seen by the conservatives in England as a nightmarish unleashing of anarchy and posing a major

threat to the social order of England. So even though, it was a multi-dimensional movement, but by and large, Romanticism placed a lot of emphasis on natural landscapes, retreating inwards, personal feeling, imagination and forging new bonds with nature to lead a truly fulfilling life.

Microcosmic:

A miniature representation of a larger object, idea or institution.

Macrocosmic:

A large organized structure, institution or even the universe considered in its entirety and contrasted with a miniature representation of it.

John Locke:

He was one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the 17th century. In his most famous work, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke provided a study of the human mind and its acquisition of knowledge. According to his theorisation, human mind is analogous to a "blank slate" or *tabula rasa* at the time of birth, bereft of any conventions for processing information and ideas are acquired primarily by sensory experiences of the world. So the notion of *tabula rasa* implied that individuals have the agency to be the authors of their lives depending on what kind of experiences they expose themselves to.

Transcreation:

This is a creative and flexible kind of translation from one language into another that endeavours to evoke similar sentiment and response as the original, but in a new context and language.

UNIT 4 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Analysis of Major Characters
 - 4.2.1 Robinson Crusoe
 - 4.2.2 Friday
 - 4.2.3 The Portuguese Captain
 - 4.2.4 Xury
 - 4.2.5 Crusoe's Father
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will undertake an in-depth discussion on the major characters in *Robinson Crusoe*. The attempt will be to assess the characters vis-a-vis the contexts in which they appear and then examine their contribution to the progression of the narrative.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis of the portrayal of characters will make us aware about the workings of the ideological politics of the author. The narrative spaces enjoyed by different characters give us a sneak-peek into the socio-political and cultural belief systems espoused by Defoe and the parameters that readers are expected to keep in mind while understanding the characters. Since posterity has called Defoe, the father of the English novel, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that he makes painstaking efforts to differentiate his characters from those one-dimensional characters which had populated the world of fantastical tales and chivalric romances. *Au contraire*, he very self-consciously draws focus to the "realism" of his characters and the authenticity of their experiences. Let's begin the analysis of the major characters of the novel.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

We begin this section by firstly defining what characters are in a novel/ play/ any other literary genre. Character very simply put, would mean a figure in any literary piece of work. Characters could be human as well as non - human entities such as animals or even inanimate entities - that however, have been personified by the author / novelist. The word character also connotes a sense of morality. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century England and France, the term character used to mean or refer to a literary genre. As far back as the late 4th and early 3rd Century BCE, the term characters was used to mean a genre in which a character type, rather than a truly individual being/ character was sketched in a brief work written in prose or verse. A character may also be a persona in a novel/ a drama/ a poem who, has been endowed with physical, moral and psychological attributes

by the novelist in such a way as to ensure that we as readers come to look upon them as real. There are several ways of classifying characters but ultimately it boils down to Forster's classification of Flat and Round characters that are easily and readily distinguishable and identifiable. Let us deal with flat characters first. Flat Characters are usually built around a single idea or quality. They are often presented rather cursorily in a single phrase or sentence and so do not go beyond a mere outline. They derive from a sense of collective identity from the type or group (social or literary) to which she/ he belongs. So, words, deeds and attitudes are dismissed as quirks of the class. And finally, flat characters are two- dimensional and so do not undergo change in the course of a novel. Round characters on the other hand are a combination of several ideas or qualities. They are sketched in detail rather painstakingly and may require an extensive treatment. They do not derive from any group. They have a distinct sense of personal identity and are often responsible for their words, deeds and attitudes. And lastly, round characters are three- dimensional and have the power to surprise us through an unexpected (though not totally improbable) act of transformation. Let us examine the character of Robinson Crusoe next. (BEGE 108, pp 23-24, Block I, Unit 2, IGNOU)

4.2.1 Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe is not an epic hero who goes on fantastical adventures, but a protagonist of the text which has been hailed by posterity as one of the first English novels that deploys a "realist" mode to tell a story about a character's extraordinary but believable bildungsroman. The narrative introduces Crusoe as a son of a merchant who leads a relatively genteel life now and desires to bequeath his wealth to Crusoe. Despite his father's repeated counselling, Crusoe is unable to suppress his longing to go on sea voyages and finally gives in to temptation. His rejection of the paternal inheritance and authority are symptomatic of his breaking away from established traditions and going on a quest for re-making his life. The narrative as a whole bears testimony to Crusoe's ingenuity and resourcefulness. These traits become all the more pronounced during his sojourn on the island where he not only survives for so many years but also toils hard to carve a comfortable retreat for himself. He perseveres for months to build a canoe, and relentlessly practices pottery making till he masters the art of it. He builds a home, a shelter for his goats, a country home, a grapes arbor, a dairy, all from scratch and keeps a journal so as to maintain a sense of order. These are crucial moments in English literary aesthetics as Crusoe's assertion of will and agency signal a new kind of hero - someone who is not living in an absolutely pre-determined world but is a self-realised individual. The Genevan philosopher *Jean-Jacques Rousseau's* high recommendation of Crusoe's hands-on approach in his fictional text, *Emile*, also plays a major role in making Crusoe's experiential learning proverbial. Crusoe not only equips himself with a fully functional survival tool kit, but also masters the art of doing business and making profit. Throughout the story, he goes on to make money efficiently, in fact, partly because of his sound business instincts. He is also able to earn a fortune in Brazil without being physically present there for twenty eight years.

It is also important to understand that Crusoe is not a uni- dimensional character but has a well-rounded personality. If he exhibits a variety of positive traits, he is not immune to the pangs of basic human emotions especially guilt, fear and panic. For a large part of the narrative, he is haunted by an irrepressible guilt for having disobeyed his father's commands. In fact he considers his solitary confinement on the island as punishment for his sins. He spends a great deal of

his time on the island fearing for his life and worrying about his security. It takes a lot of time and effort including an episode of feverish hallucinations to make him believe that an angel has paid him a visit and convince him that he has been liberated from his sins and given a fresh chance to start anew. After this, Crusoe actively rebuilds his life, combines his business ethics with Christian morality and reconciles himself to the current state of affairs. The emotional turmoil that he goes through to achieve this state of mental peace renders his character portrayal "realistic."

Since the novel is thoroughly enmeshed in the valorisation of individualism and self-sufficiency, Crusoe's approach to life is premised upon utilitarian logic to the extent that he measures a person's worth solely on the basis of their usefulness to him. He harbours no guilt for selling Xury, into slavery. His attitude towards Friday is relatively better but the relationship is extremely hierarchical and predicated on racial prejudices. In fact his dealings with people often bring out his acquisitive tendencies and obsession with power and prestige. He deploys slave labour on his plantations and consequently, amasses a lot of wealth. He goes on slaving expeditions and has no compunction at the prospect of using fellow human beings as slaves. In fact, like a proto-capitalist he seems to have internalised the popular belief that exploitation of the coloured/ black races is integral to British commerce and trade. His absolute indifference towards his wife (since he does not even tell us her name in spite of having fathered 3 children with her), again brings out the fact that for Crusoe, people exist for the sole purpose of serving him. It is impossible to fully grasp Crusoe's character portrayal without taking into account his white supremacist ideologies and colonialist tendencies. In fact, his bildungsroman reveals that rise of individualism, middle-class sensibilities, Protestant work ethic, capitalism and imperialism are inter-related and cannot be made sense of in isolation from each other. Let us look at Friday next.

4.2.2 Friday

Friday's character is portrayed as loaded with social and political significance in not only the English literary landscape but also the larger cultural repertoire. Though a highly individualised character, he is also a representative of all the natives of non-European lands who are eventually, economically, culturally and psychologically colonised. Defoe has given a vibrant personality to Friday and has depicted him as an affectionate human being, thereby, defying the western stereotypical assumptions about coloured people. Friday is very expressive and delights in human bonds, for instance, his joy knows no bounds when he is unexpectedly united with his father. He has a very thorough understanding of his own god *Benamuckee* and asks some very intelligent questions to Crusoe that sometimes leave the latter baffled, for instance, Crusoe is unable to satisfactorily reply to his question on the role of the devil in Christianity.

Having said all that, it is also important to understand that though Crusoe realises on befriending Friday that he is not exactly the "savage," he assumed him to be, but he cannot envisage a friendship of complete equality with Friday. Crusoe's attitude is extremely condescending and paternalistic towards him. Even though Friday has his own ideological beliefs and understanding of religion, Crusoe never gives them due importance or credit. Instead, he interprets his gratitude (for having saved his life), as a sign of complete subordination to him for the rest of his life. Crusoe treats him like an infant and imposes his will on him by teaching him the fundamentals of Christianity, English language and the English way of living without having any desire to imbibe any of his cultural norms.

It is important to understand that though some stereotypical assumptions are destabilised by representing Friday as a warm and loving companion to Crusoe, but the narrative as a whole does not take these destabilisation of racial hierarchies to their logical conclusion and ends up reiterating white supremacist ideologies. Friday enjoys narrative space and a relatively positive character portrayal only because he is very passive and willing to subsume his identity under that of Crusoe's. His servile nature is symbolic of his acknowledgement of the cultural and socio-political superiority of Crusoe. Postcolonial rewritings of *Robinson Crusoe*, from the point of view of Friday, like **J. M. Coetzee's** *Foe* and **Michel Tournier's** *Friday*, give a completely different trajectory to the plotline and starkly highlight the brutal consequences and eventual repercussions of master-slave relationships as in the case of Crusoe and Friday.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Do you think Crusoe would have been favourably predisposed towards Friday if he had not been servile?

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- 2) How are industrialisation, rise of the bourgeoisie and colonisation inter-related? Explain with reference to the character portrayal of Crusoe.

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- 3) How is Robinson Crusoe a "realist" novel? What is the larger significance of its popularity in the 18th century?

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- 4) How does negative cultural stereotyping contribute towards colonisation? Explain with reference to Robinson Crusoe.

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4.2.3 The Portuguese Captain

The Portuguese Captain is another relatively developed European character and functions as a harbinger of good news for the eponymous protagonist, Crusoe. He arrives at very significant climactic moments in the text and positively contributes in propelling the narrative. Firstly, he helps Crusoe and takes him to Brazil, after he flees from the captivity of the Moors. He helps Crusoe to successfully run his

plantations and earn huge profits. Secondly, when Crusoe is marooned on the island, he takes care of his plantations for 28 years and later informs him about the wealth that he has amassed and works out the logistics to sell the plantation and send him the money. As far as the conventional morality of 18th century Europe is concerned, the Portuguese captain is a paragon of all virtues. However, it is also important to understand that he buys Xury from Crusoe to work as a slave for him. Actively practising slavery does not seem to contradict his inner conscience. In fact, it appears that slavery is a part and parcel of a successful European estate. This particular instance again highlights that morality is a construct and the binaries of "good" and "evil" are subject to change.

The novel as a whole largely endorses Crusoe's resourcefulness and self-sufficiency and posterity has celebrated him as the poster boy of individualism. But critically scrutinising the role and contribution of the Portuguese captain in Crusoe's eventual monetary success makes one question the praises that have been heaped on Crusoe's enterprising skills and business acumen. No doubt that Crusoe manifests exemplary ingenuity on the island but his success and eventual profit on the plantations are largely because of the Portuguese captain who not only helps him establish the plantations but also oversees them during his absence. Thus, analysing the character portrayal of the Portuguese captain makes the readers re-visit the character of Crusoe also. Crusoe might not admit it but he does benefit from the human connections that he forges during his sea journeys and friendship with the Portuguese captain has certainly played an important role. In fact, the Portuguese captain takes on the role of his surrogate father. Let's look at Xury next.

4.2.4 Xury

Xury is a young Maresco servant on the ship on which Crusoe is a slave. Xury exhibits great loyalty to Crusoe and together they plot and plan their escape from the Moors. Xury's unconditional devotion to Crusoe also foreshadows Friday's unquestioning obedience to Crusoe. Like Friday, the positive representation of Xury is premised upon his willingness to acknowledge the socio-cultural, political and racial superiority of Crusoe. On the contrary, Crusoe does not really feel obligated to return that loyalty. In fact, he manipulates Xury's loyalty and affectionate nature strategically to his advantage and does not shy away from selling him back into slavery to the Portuguese captain for a good profit. Xury's character portrayal and contribution to the progression of the narrative is once again a reminder that the novel is written from the perspective of a white middle-class man and celebrates his good fortune and adventures, often at the cost of undermining the liberties of the non-white people. This reiterates once more that the rise of the bourgeoisie and their influence in the socio-political sphere and industrialisation of Europe were inextricably tied to the colonial desire to find new lands for raw materials and free labour so as to maximise profit and cut down production costs. The character of Crusoe's Father also needs to be examined we shall do that next.

4.2.5 Crusoe's Father

Crusoe's father is a merchant who earns enough money to buy himself a small estate and lead a cultivated middle-class life. In fact, he is the embodiment of the merits of the Protestant values and counsels Crusoe to partake of this lifestyle rather than relinquishing his inheritance and going on sea voyages. Since the *bildungsroman* of Robinson Crusoe echoes the biblical story of Adam's disobedience of God's command, Crusoe's father becomes an important

character in driving the narrative forward. Though physically absent for most of the narrative except for the initial few chapters, the guilt of Crusoe for defying his father's wishes continues to haunt him for a very long time. The trajectory of the plot is centred around the sin of filial disobedience, atonement for going against his father's desires when marooned on the island and deliverance from his sins when he discovers his wealth. While Crusoe initially goes against his father who apart from being his biological patriarch, is also a representative of established traditions and authority, he eventually ends up practising Protestant work ethic coupled with business acumen during his sojourn on the island. In fact, he manages to replicate a somewhat comfortable middle-class living for himself on the island.

So even though Crusoe's father does not enjoy much space in the narrative, the novel as a whole is obsessed with patriarchal and patrilineal transference and traditional heritage between fathers and legitimate sons, which exclude women. Again, it reinforces the fact that the primary, driving impulse of the plotline is to valorise the middle-class sensibilities that celebrate white supremacist and masculinist values.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In what ways does the novel celebrate masculinist norms and male-bonding?
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- 2) What role does the Portuguese captain play in Robinson Crusoe?
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- 3) What does the treatment of Xury say about the ideological politics of the novel?
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- 4) Is Crusoe a changed man at the end of the novel or is he still the same?
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4.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the major characters of Robinson Crusoe and has critically engaged with them to understand the ideological politics

of the narrative. The character portrayals cannot be divorced from 18th century English society that was slowly transitioning from an extremely feudal society characterised by rigid hierarchies to a relatively fluid social order which started prizing personal merit over inheritance. Crusoe is the quintessential 18th century hero and closely scrutinising his character makes us realise that he often derived his selfhood at the cost of subjugating non-Europeans like Xury and Friday. This unit has helped you to make sense of the major players in the story, who by their presence and even absence contour the narrative and make it possible for readers to read it from alternative perspectives, by going against the grain.

4.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The novel has portrayed Friday as a warm and affectionate being, contrary to the stereotypical assumptions that had labelled all non-Europeans as irrational, violent, aggressive and incapable of reasoning. In depicting Friday as a good human being, the storyline has also rendered him obsequious and servile in nature. According to the ideological politics of the novel, a non-European is good only if he/she passively accepts the tutelage of a white man. So "goodness" in a "savage" implies subservience to white authority. Given the rationale of the plot, Crusoe would not have been favourably predisposed towards Friday had he not been so servile.
2. Given the narrative politics of the novel, Crusoe represents the rising bourgeoisie in England who had become a social force to be reckoned in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Industrial Revolution necessitated cheap raw material and labour and therefore provided the solid economic motive to hunt for them in faraway lands. This purely economic-driven phenomenon was given the semblance of bringing the so-called enlightenment to non-European territories. Similarly in the story, Crusoe exhibits the prized middle-class virtues of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness and goes on to become the quintessential self-realised man after braving sea storms, wild animals, mutinies and nature in its most elemental form. But it is also important to understand that this self-sufficiency is premised upon procuring slaves from non-European lands and exploiting their services. Like a proto-capitalist, Crusoe is quite excited about his "absolute command" over all subjects of his little kingdom on the island and happily provides the readers with an inventory of his possessions on the island which includes his two homes, the "fortress" and the "country seat," grape valley, agricultural lands and enclosures for the grazing of his cattle.
3. 18th century is the age of rising bourgeoisie who go on to assume social and economic clout. This necessitates a demand for a new conceptualisation of the "hero." Chivalric knights and warriors who fight epic battles amidst grand backgrounds no longer meet the requirements of a society that is in the process of getting industrialised, urbanised and mechanised. With rigid feudal structures losing some of their former relevance and merchants, traders and professionals gaining some power, the backdrop is set to welcome a new kind of hero who is a self-made man. The novel is very self-conscious about not dabbling in the realms of fancy and ensuring that Crusoe embodies the virtue of self-sufficiency by following the Protestant work ethic. The story pays great attention to minute details and tries to capture the authenticity of the experience by repeatedly foregrounding the ruminations of Crusoe and how they shape his journey. Even though the Providential framework remains

intact, Crusoe seems to have a relatively secular materialist understanding of life.

4. Historical events bear witness that cultural stereotyping and geographical colonisation have worked in tandem. Since Robinson Crusoe has been read as a handbook for European colonialism, it is possible to understand how labelling a race as culturally inferior and making sure they internalise this inferiority make the members of that race very susceptible to colonisation. Crusoe's behaviour towards Xury and Friday are perfect examples to understand how the binaries of "civilized" and "savage" work in enabling the colonisation of the identities of those designated as "savages."

Check Your Progress 2

1. The theme of filial obedience is pervasively present throughout the narrative. Even though Crusoe's father does make any appearance after the initial few pages, disobeying his wishes continues to haunt Crusoe. The storyline repeatedly stresses bonds between men, for instance, Crusoe's friendship with the Portuguese captain. Women are mostly absent and if present, they have token presence. For instance, Crusoe alludes to his marriage and the death of his wife in mere two lines. This speaks volumes about the gender politics of the story.
2. The Portuguese captain embodies virtues of generosity of spirit, kindness and affection and his social connection with Crusoe really helps him to consolidate his position as a successful plantation owner in Brazil. His presence in the story highlights the fact that Crusoe might want to believe that he has single-handedly achieved everything, but the benefits of his friendship with the captain cannot be dismissed. Secondly, in spite of being an embodiment of Christian ideals, the Captain does not seem to harbour any guilt for buying Xury as a slave. This again foregrounds how conceptualisation of morality cannot be divorced from the socio-political and economic circumstances.
3. Xury is represented as a simple-minded youth who actively helps Crusoe to plan their escape from the Moors. After having escaped enslavement, Crusoe does not have much guilt pangs to sell Xury back into slavery. According to the ideological politics of the novel, slavery is integrally tied to the prosperity of the plantation owners, so for all the endorsing of Protestant work ethic and piety, the novel does not fully condemn the exploitation of slaves.
4. Yes and no both. He has gone through lot of trials and tribulations and has come to acknowledge and appreciate the bounties of God and is filled with huge gratitude for the Providence for overseeing his welfare. He has shed some of his prejudices regarding non-whites, for instance, he befriends Friday (though he is very condescending in his attitude towards him). But he still continues to have a very utilitarian approach towards people, for instance, his attitude towards his wife.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Jean Jacques Rousseau: a Genevan philosopher and political theorist who had played a major role in revolutionizing the development of modern socio-political thought process in Europe. One of his most important piece of writing, *Emile* (1762), is an educational treatise that argues that

children learn faster by precept rather than instruction and stresses a lot on the experiential dimension of acquiring knowledge. This novel hails Robinson Crusoe as an ideal text for children so as to become self-realized individuals.

Ideological politics: Ideology implies a systematic set of beliefs and values that shape our perception of the world around us. Ideological politics mean organizing the thought process/ values/ moral concerns in a manner that they privilege certain socio-political and economic structures over others.

Internalization: It means to imbibe cultural values/social hierarchies/ customary beliefs through socialization and conditioning.

Conventional morality: The societal norms regarding "good" and "bad," "moral" and "immoral." Though these binaries are subject to change in case of re-structuring of socio-cultural and economic forces, but for a given historical moment they carry a semblance of fixity and rigidity.

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Block**2****JONATHAN SWIFT: *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS***

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This block introduces **Jonathan Swift** as a writer and his works and a detailed study of his most famous novel *Gulliver's Travels*. This block will examine the times he lived and wrote in and also look at the circumstances that shaped and coloured Swift's writings. Swift as you may be aware was a satirist who wrote about his times and his own ambivalent feelings towards Ireland his eventual home. Jonathan Swift was born in 1667 after the end of the Puritan rule (1660), and died in 1745, and may be regarded as an Anglo-Irish author, who is primarily remembered for his political satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). We must remember that it was a tumultuous time politically as England was torn between the Whigs and the Tories and then the Puritans and the Catholics. In the midst of all this chaos emerge the writings of Jonathan Swift. This block will also discuss his other important works briefly.

Unit 1: Jonathan Swift: Life and Works

Unit 2: *Gulliver's Travels*: Philosophical and Political Background

Unit 3: *Gulliver's Travels*: Book I –III: Character, Summary, Themes, and Analysis

Unit 4: *Gulliver's Travels*: Book IV: Summary, Themes and Analysis

Please read *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift for this block.

UNIT 1 JONATHAN SWIFT : LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Swift's Background
 - 1.2.1 A Whig or a Tory
 - 1.2.2 *A Tale of a Tub* and Swift's Disenchantment with his English Lineage
 - 1.2.3 *The Battle of the Books* and Neoclassicism
- 1.3 On the Irish Language
- 1.4 Satire in the Classical and the Neoclassical Age
 - 1.4.1 Horace, Juvenal, and Swift
 - 1.4.2 Swift and "savage indignation"
 - 1.4.3 Definitions of Satire in the Neoclassical Age
- 1.5 *Gulliver's Travels* and Other Works
 - 1.5.1 Swift's Ambivalent Attitude towards Ireland
 - 1.5.2 Publication and Secrecy
 - 1.5.3 A Modest or a Monstrous Proposal
 - 1.5.4 Victory for the Irish Patriots and the *Drapier*
- 1.6 A Misanthrope or a Philanthropist
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.

(Jonathan Swift, *The Battle of the Books*)

This unit aims to provide a biographical account of Jonathan Swift and discuss his significant works at length. It proposes to analyse his Anglo-Irish identity and its implications on his writings and political affiliation. We will examine terms like Whig, Tory, satire, and neoclassicism closely, to comprehend the age in which Swift wrote. We will also look at the similarities between Swift and the Roman satirist Juvenal (55 ADE- 2nd Century ADE), for indignation is at the heart of their writings. The unit will seek to answer the question as to why Swift concealed his true identity and chose different pseudonyms while writing his satires. A critical examination of his satires, including *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*, and others, would enable us to understand Swift's trenchant critique of English colonialism. It will also help us analyse Swift's ambivalent feelings towards Ireland. We will attempt to answer how an Englishman began to be perceived as an Irish patriot. The last section of this unit questions Swift's identity as a mad misanthrope and foregrounds his philanthropic nature.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), an Anglo-Irish author, is primarily remembered

for his political satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which is also read as a child fable in abridged form. He was a posthumous child, born of English parents in Dublin, where he was educated at Trinity College. He constantly moved between England and Ireland during his formative years and eventually became Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, in 1713. Thereafter, he settled down in Ireland forever. In 1660, the Restoration brought an end to the Puritan rule that had succeeded the English civil war of the 1640s and the 1650s, (that we know of from Block 2 of BEGC 107). Shortly afterwards, a large number of Protestant English men and women were encouraged to settle in Ireland, where they were awarded land that used to be owned by the Catholics. Swift's parents and uncles became the beneficiaries of this scheme when they decided to try their fortune in Ireland (Damrosch, Ch. 1).

But Swift always adored London. "The best and greatest part of my life", Swift wrote to his friend John Gay from Dublin in a letter dated January 1722, "I spent in England; there I made my friendships, and there I left my desires." He lamented further, "I am condemned forever to another country." While living in London, he made friends with **Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot**, and formed the *Scriblerus Club* with them. Subsequently, he became a propagandist for the Tory administration. Despite his desire to live in England, Swift had to overcome his ambition and spend most of his life as a dean in Dublin. He regarded his return to Ireland as an exile but eventually wrote for the Irish cause. As a political satirist, poet, pamphleteer, and member of the English settlement in Ireland, he opposed British colonialism. He challenged the policies of the English government in Ireland and became a trenchant critique of the atrocities of the British perpetrated against the Anglo - Irish population. Consequently, he was celebrated as an Irish patriot. Swift himself was painfully aware of his double identity as an Anglo-Irish. He reveals in the *Drapier's Letters* (1724) that "he both is and is not Irish, both is and is not English" (Oakleaf, 29). His life was characterised by a number of paradoxes and mixed loyalties. Despite his divided allegiance, he has appealed to the successive generation of writers and political thinkers for his ability to oppose colonialism and the dehumanising side of colonial modernity. **W B Yeats, George Orwell, Mahatma Gandhi, and Edward Said** found in Swift's writings, an incisive critique of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, political absolutism and condemnation of modern civilisation. Let us now look at Swift's background.

1.2 SWIFT'S BACKGROUND

One of the most significant features of 18th century England was the constant conflict between several religious and political denominations. Society was politically divided between the Whigs and the Tories, liberals and conservatives, sympathisers of the parliament and those of the king. Similarly, on religious grounds, there were sharp divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism, between Puritanism and Catholicism, and the Anglican Church and the dissenters. In the English Civil War and the years following the war, which saw the restoration of Charles II in 1660, the Whigs supported the cause of the Parliament whereas, the Tories extended their support to the monarch and the aristocrats. When **Robert Walpole**, a Whig, became the first Prime Minister of England in 1721, the power of the Tories began to decline. Poets, priests, and politicians often shifted their political allegiance to seek favour from the ruling party and to evade state censorship. We need to situate Swift's life and works in this political and religious context to comprehend the factious age that shaped him.

1.2.1 A Whig or a Tory

“Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory”, wrote the neoclassical poet Alexander Pope in his translation of the first satire of the Roman poet **Horace** (about whom we studied in BEGC 102). Swift, too, began his career as a Whig and later became a Tory. He found a political mentor in **Sir William Temple**, a retired Whig diplomat, who hired Swift as a secretary. He worked as Temple’s amanuensis and read aloud his letters in Latin and English. Upon Temple’s death, Swift defended Whig Lords impeached by the House of Commons in *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissentions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome* (1701). Shortly afterwards, he dedicated his prose satire *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) to *Baron Somers*, an influential member of the Whig Party. Let’s see what *A Tale of a Tub* is about next.

1.2.2 *A Tale of a Tub* and Swift’s Disenchantment with his English Lineage

A Tale of a Tub tells the story of three brothers – Peter, Jack, and Martin – who represent Roman Catholicism, Calvinistic dissent, and Anglicanism, respectively. The narrative is characterised by parody, gaps, subversions and long digressions on hack writers, madness, and on ancient and modern literature. The book is perceived as an “effervescent attack on Catholic additions to, and Protestant detractions from”, the fundamental tenets of the Christian Church. The basic doctrines of the Church are represented in the form of a coat, which the brothers inherit and alter according to their whims (Sanders, 281). As the story constantly oscillates between the main plot and long digressions, it can be seen as a precursor to a novel like **Laurence Sterne’s** *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Sterne’s protagonist and the narrator, Tristram, too, constantly digress and the plot barely moves.

Swift had written this allegory to please Queen Anne and to seek her favour. But to his utmost surprise, the satirical representation of the English Church infuriated the queen so much that his chances to rise within the English Church ended forever. This could have happened because of the character Martin, a representative of the Church of England, who gambles, and whores like his brothers, and which the queen may have found objectionable. This incident left Swift utterly disenchanted with his English lineage, as he wanted to be the bishop of an English church. Much later, Swift humorously fictionalised this episode in *Gulliver’s Travels*, where he briefly recast himself as Gulliver and the British queen as the queen of the imaginary island Lilliput. As Swift’s allegory had scandalised the queen, so his fictional creation Gulliver had to face the wrath of the queen of Lilliput for extinguishing the palace fire by urinating on it. After dousing the flames, Gulliver expects some reward from the queen for this commendable job. But later he gets to know that the queen refuses to stay in the defiled palace and he is faced with impeachment. There are parallels between the disenchantment of Swift with Queen Anne and the disillusionment of Gulliver with the queen of Lilliput. His other early work *The Battle of the Books* will be examined next.

1.2.3 *The Battle of the Books* and Neoclassicism

The Battle of the Books or *An Account of a Battle between the Ancient and Modern Books in St. James’s Library* is a short satire published along with *A Tale of a Tub*. The allegorical squib was a tribute to his Whig patron *William Temple*, who defended classical literature against contemporary vernacular literature. In the various salons and academies of Europe, the question of superiority of the ancient vis-à-vis the modern was widely debated. In France, scholars who were trying to free science from ancient Greece and Rome championed the modern over the

ancient. **Charles Perrault**, known for his collection of fairy tales, claimed that the French poet **Boileau** was better than the ancient poet **Horace** and the French playwright **Corneille** greater than the Greek playwright **Sophocles** (Damrosch, ch.4). As a neoclassical author, Swift overruled this model. He rejected the notion that the accomplishments of modern authors rivalled those of the ancient world. For him, classical Greek and Roman models of literary excellence were sacrosanct and could not be surpassed. Let us begin by trying to understand what neoclassicism means.

The term neoclassical literature refers to the works of authors such as Alexander Pope, **John Dryden**, Jonathan Swift, **Joseph Addison**, **Samuel Johnson**, and some others who wrote in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These authors shared certain common traits. They had great respect for the writers of ancient Greece and Rome. Classical works provided models of excellence and imitation, for they had survived the test of time. Poetry for the neoclassical poets was to be an imitation of human life and nature. It was characterised by reason, restraint, decorum, and moderation. Great literature was to provide both instruction and pleasure to the readers. The neoclassical authors were inspired by the ancient Latin poet, Horace, who in his work *Ars Poetica*, that is, *The Art of Poetry*, wrote that the aim of poetry was to entertain and to instruct. Neoclassical art, therefore, was not guided by the maxim, 'art for art's sake' but by a newer maxim, 'art for the sake of humanity'. Since there was an emphasis on instruction and reform as the objectives of literature and art forms, the genre of satire both in prose as well as verse became popular. Pope pioneered the genre of verse satire whereas Swift was the master of prose satire.

In the allegory *The Battle of the Books*, Swift uses characters, including **Aristotle**, **Virgil**, **Aesop**, **Bacon**, and **Descartes** from both the ancient and contemporary times in a humorous fashion to capture the conflict between the ancient and the modern. In the book, Aristotle shoots an arrow at Bacon but hits Descartes inadvertently. The ancient poet Virgil encounters his modern translator Dryden in a mock-heroic fashion.

After the fiasco of *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift became the chief propagandist for a Tory Ministry headed by **Robert Harley**, who had himself begun his career as a Whig and later became a Tory (Oakleaf, 2). Swift also wrote for the Tory journal *The Examiner*. Harley, a great reader and collector of manuscripts, appreciated Swift's charm and wit, and liked to call him Martin, a character in *The Tale of a Tub*. Despite this friendship, Harley could not persuade the Queen to change her mind and appoint Swift a Bishop. Only the queen could appoint Bishops whereas, other influential people had the right to appoint Deans. A Dean is a priest who is in charge of the daily affairs of the cathedral whereas the Bishop is the head of the diocese as a whole. Swift eventually gave up on becoming a bishop after having waited patiently for years and accepted the post of Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral at Dublin, an office he held for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, Queen Anne was happy to get rid of Swift. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in Swift's life, as he gradually began to enjoy the administrative and religious responsibilities of a Dean in Ireland. It appears that he liked his new title, for in his poems he refers to himself as "the Dean" over 170 times (Damrosch, Ch. 18). Let's now look at his life in Ireland next.

1.3 ON THE IRISH LANGUAGE

In Ireland, he continued to be torn apart between his English lineage and the Irish cause, between the English language and the local Irish tongue. He was no

admirer of the Irish tongue and thought that it trapped its speakers “in a cultural ghetto”. He called it “barbarous” and was critical of “its abominable sounds”. He believed that the native language did more than anything else to “prevent the Irish from being tamed.” Surprisingly, like a true Englishman, he talked about “civilizing” the Irish in much the same way that the English would talk about its subjects in colonial India. As an English citizen and defender of the English language, he emphasised that the Irish language should be abolished, and English should be made compulsory on every occasion of business in shops, markets, fairs and other places of dealing. (Damrosch, Ch.18). However, known for writing polemical satires, he defended the Anglo-Irish Protestants of Ireland against the atrocities of the English Whigs, especially in the *Drapier’s Letters* (1724), *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729). We said that Swift was a satirist, let us now examine satire as a genre – both in the classical age as well as in the neoclassical age in the next section.

1.4 SATIRE IN THE CLASSICAL AND THE NEOCLASSICAL AGE

A satire according to Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms, is “a literary device for the artful ridicule of a folly or vice as a means of exposing or correcting it. The subject of satire is generally human frailty, as it manifests in people’s behaviour or ideas as well as societal institutions or other creations. Satire utilises tones of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation towards a flawed subject with the hope of creating awareness and subsequent change”.

Lit Charts describes a satire as making use any of the following tactics such as, “humor, irony, sarcasm, or ridicule to criticise something or someone. Public figures, such as politicians, are often the subject of satire, but satirists can take aim at other targets as well—from societal conventions to government policies. Satire is an entertaining form of social commentary, and it occurs in many forms: there are satirical novels, poems, and essays, as well as satirical films, shows, and cartoons. Satire is a bit unusual as a literary term because it can be used to describe both a literary device and the specific genre of literature that makes use of the device. Just like a comedy is comedic because it uses comedy, a satire is satirical because it uses satire”. This is basically to refresh your memory on satire as a literary genre, as we have already studied this genre earlier (BEGC 102, Block 4). Let us continue with our discussion on the ancient satirists and the neoclassicists who used the satire.

1.4.1 Horace, Juvenal, and Swift

One of the ways to analyse the continuity and discontinuity between the classical and the neoclassical age is through literary forms and genres. The poets and authors of this age borrowed the genre of the satire and the epistle from the ancient Greco-Roman world and used them widely to articulate their concerns. Although one may find some precedents for satire in ancient Greece, the genre of satire, strictly speaking, is of Roman origin (again, recall what we studied in BEGC 102, Block 4). **Lucilius** (148 BCE-103 BCE) is proclaimed as the founder of Roman satire. Apart from Lucilius, **Persius** (34 ADE-62 ADE), and **Quintilian** (35 ADE- 100ADE) were some of the prominent satirists in ancient Rome. But Horace (65 BCE- 8 BCE) and Juvenal (50 ADE-2nd century ADE) brought perfection to the genre of satire in Rome. To acknowledge their contribution to satire, English satire is classified into two parts: the Horatian satire and the Juvenalian satire. The former is characterised by playfulness whereas the latter

by resentment. In the Horatian satire, the narrator is a city-dweller, who writes for the sake of amusement at the sight of human folly and pretentiousness. Horace, a contemporary of the Roman emperor **Augustus Caesar**, celebrates the new *pax romana* – Roman peace – established by the emperor after years of civil war. He gained the patronage of **Gaius Maecenas** (70 BC- 8 BC), a close friend and ally of the emperor. Maecenas gave Horace the Sabine farm, where he led a carefree life and wrote witty and urban satires.

Unlike Horace, Juvenal could not gain the support of a powerful patron. His biting satires, therefore, lack his predecessor's witticism and are known for indignation and denunciation of Rome. While Pope in his satires oscillates between the Horatian and the Juvenalian model, Swift is closer to Juvenal. Both Juvenal and Swift remained on the margins of society. They both lacked an influential patron and hence, anger became the central force of the bleak world that they represent.

1.4.2 Swift and “savage indignation”

A common trope in Juvenal and Swift is indignation. In *Satire I*, Juvenal writes that it has become impossible to live in the monstrous city of Rome. Given the decadence of the city, it is hard not to write satire. He argues further that though it is against nature to be angry, yet indignatio (indignation) constitutes his verses (Juvenal, 9). In *Satire III*, the narrator Umbricius is so upset with the corrupt ways of city life that he decides to leave Rome and sets off for the countryside at Cumae. The satire inspired Samuel Johnson so much that he modelled his poem “London” after Juvenal's *Satire III*. Juvenal decides not to remain silent and to speak against the corruption of Rome. What Rome was to Juvenal, London was to Swift. The Latin satirist excoriates the moral depravity of Rome indignantly whereas, Swift satirises London. Swift, to a great extent, surpasses even Juvenal. For Juvenal, Rome is the object of satire but for Swift, the object of satire in *Gulliver's Travels* is not England alone but entire humanity.

Swift uses the Latin word indignatio in his epitaph that he composed for himself in Latin. The Irish poet W B Yeats (1865-1939), translated this epitaph later into English. Yeats's translation uses the word “savage indignation” in the opening stanza of the poem: “Swift has sailed into his rest;/Savage indignation there/ Cannot lacerate his Breast.” The Irish Dean knew that there was no escape from indignation as long as he lived. Only death could put an end to his anger. The satirist was incensed and aghast at a society that had lost its moral purpose. The reason behind this anger was to reform a decadent society through satire.

1.4.3 Definitions of Satire in the Neoclassical Age

“The true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction. And he who writes honestly is no more an enemy to the offender, than the physician to the patient, when he prescribes harsh remedies to an inveterate disease”, wrote John Dryden (1631-1700) in the preface to his verse satire *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681). As a physician treats an individual, a satirist cures the society of its illness. Similarly, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) defines satire in his Dictionary (1755) as a “poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.” Like Dryden and Johnson, amendment was central to Swift's project of writing satires. “I wrote for their amendment, and not their approbation”, maintained Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, while discussing the objective behind writing this book. To achieve the goal of amending the ills of society, the Anglo-Irish priest did not shy away from either displeasing the high and the mighty or expressing his antagonism against the entire human race. He is often called a misanthrope owing to his lacerating satires and resentment against the species of man, mainly in *Gulliver's Travels*,

Book IV, where Gulliver concludes that horses are superior to men. Without much further ado, let us begin looking at his *Gulliver's Travels* and some of his other important works in the next section.

1.5 GULLIVER'S TRAVELS AND OTHER WORKS

As mentioned earlier in section 1.1 and 1.3, Swift had a very ambivalent relationship with Ireland. Remember he was an Englishman now appointed as a Dean in Dublin, Ireland.

1.5.1 Swift's Ambivalent Attitude towards Ireland

In his pamphlets and satires, Swift foregrounds the political and economic wrongs of Ireland under British rule. However, he defended only the interests of English settlers and neglected the natives, who he despised. The despicable creatures called Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* can be seen as a fictional representation of these natives. It is ironical that despite his condemnation of the Irish language and the local people, later he was hailed as an Irish patriot and appropriated as a symbol of Irish nationalism. Nevertheless, writing from the perspective of a white settler, he produced a trenchant critique of English colonialism in *Gulliver's Travels*.

1.5.2 Publication and Secrecy

The story behind the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* is as intriguing as the text itself. The original title of the book was *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*. It was ostensibly written by Lemuel Gulliver, "first a SURGEON, and then a CAPTAIN of several SHIPS". The name *Gulliver's Travels* by which the book is universally known now is a shortened version. Swift's name was nowhere mentioned as the author of this polemical satire. It was a deliberate ploy on the part of the satirist to conceal his name. Jonathan Swift loved secrecy, disguise, and mystery. Most of his satirical writings were first published anonymously or pseudonymously. He preferred to write under assumed names: **Isaac Bickerstaff**, **Drapier**, and **Lemuel Gulliver**.

"Sometimes the last thing that an anonymous author wants is to remain unidentified", wrote **John Mullan** in his book *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (2008). Swift meticulously planned its publication to keep its authorship hidden. He got the text transcribed in another man's handwriting and arranged for the sample to be dropped secretly by an intermediary at a publisher's house. The manuscript was accompanied by a letter purporting to be from Lemuel Gulliver's cousin, one "Richard Sympson". The entire book was offered to the publisher for publication in return for £200. Swift had originally written this letter but his friend John Gay had copied it to conceal the identity of his friend. The publisher **Benjamin Motte** accepted the mysterious offer. Shortly afterwards, Pope, Swift's close friend and probably co-conspirator, discussed the book with the mystified publisher and pretended to be equally puzzled. The author, in the meanwhile, had returned quietly to Dublin to resume his duties as a dean (Mullan, 9).

Gulliver's Travels, written in the form of a quasi-travelogue, tells the story of Lemuel Gulliver, an English surgeon who rises to become a ship's captain. Each time Gulliver embarks on a new journey, his ship is wrecked, and he is left stranded on a new island. Although he is the lone survivor of the shipwreck, fortunately, he returns home safely each time. It became immensely popular immediately upon its publication and readers attempted to attribute its authorship to varied figures. Mullan reflects on the popularity of the book and speculation of readers:

His satire had managed to be, as Gay said, 'the conversation of the whole town' – by which he meant the fashionable, the clever and the powerful. It was written to cause a fuss, to be talked about. In its early life, Gulliver's Travels was, above all, a topic of conversation, and some of this conversation was concerned with its authorship. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, writing to her sister in November 1726, guessed, both shrewdly and inaccurately, at the company that had produced this work, which 'all our people of taste run mad about'. It was, she supposed, jointly composed by 'a dignify'd clergyman, an Eminent Physician, and the first poet of the Age' (13).

The clergyman, physician, and the first poet of the age, referred to Swift, Arbuthnot, and Pope, respectively. These speculations became a source of pleasure for the author. There could be several reasons behind concealing one's true identity for a satirist in the 18th century England, including self-promotion, mischievousness, and evasion of state censorship. The persecution of authors, printers, and publishers was quite common in England during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially after the Restoration of 1660.

In February 1663, the London printer **John Twyn** was convicted of treason. He awaited execution in Newgate Prison. The printer was to be hanged, drawn and quartered after the execution. He was to die in prolonged agony as a terrifying lesson to onlookers. Twyn was accused of printing an anonymous pamphlet titled *A Treatise of the Execution of Justice*. The pamphlet justified the people's right to rebellion and described the king as accountable to his subjects. The content was judged as seditious.

There was no evidence to suggest that John Twyn was the author. He had only turned it from manuscript to print. Despite knowing that by confessing his crime and revealing the name of the author, he could save his life, Twyn refused to betray the pamphleteer. (Mullan, 138)

In this volatile political context, when the memory of the execution of his father-**Charles I** was still fresh in the mind of the new king, the job of a satirist was fraught with dangers. It was not for nothing, then, that Swift chose to write with different pseudonyms. Mullan contends that Alexander Pope often used anonymity to provoke the readers whereas his friend "Jonathan Swift did sometimes wish to protect himself, if not from the guesses of readers, then at least from prosecution" (168). Book I of *Gulliver's Travels* is an attack on England, on the dominant Whig Party, in particular on the powerful Whig minister Robert Walpole. The use of Gulliver as the purported author of satire would have worked as a safety valve for Swift had he invited the wrath of the powerful sections of English society.

1.5.3 A Modest or a Monstrous Proposal

Another satire where he masks his true identity in defence of Irish interests is *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor people in Ireland, from being a Burden to their parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Public*. Although the long title is self-explanatory, Swift is known as the master of irony. There is usually a gap between what he intends to convey and what he literally conveys. The readers of Swift, therefore, cannot afford to remain passive while reading his text. They need to be active participants in the act of reading and read between the lines to detect the irony, to avoid misreading him. It is dangerous, therefore, to make an assertion, a claim about his intention, for whatever a reader or literary critic contends about Swift may easily be rejected by another counter-claim. Nothing on earth could be as immodest as the proposal that Swift calls modest. He suggests a monstrous proposal for the human consumption

of the surplus infant population of Ireland by the Irish and English gentry. The narrator laments the presence of the Irish poor and their children, and then comes up with the outrageous proposal:

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own Thoughts; which I hope will not be liable to the least Objection. I have been assured by a very knowing American of my Acquaintance in London; that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and, I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a Fricasie, or a Ragoust. (A Modest Proposal, 4)

The author of this appalling proposal could not be initially traced. Claiming to be a well-wisher of the world, the narrator proposes to solve the issues of overpopulation, poverty and food scarcity in Ireland by advising the Irish to eat their babies. In an ironic vein, he not only comes up with the proposal of cannibalism but also confidently maintains that the horrendous idea will be met with the least resistance. The strength of this satire lies in its ability to draw the attention of readers to the evils of English colonialism. The narrator seems to argue that since the colonial masters have already consumed all the resources of Ireland, why don't they eat their babies too? The pamphlet impels us to think of colonialism and cannibalism simultaneously.

1.5.4 Victory for the Irish Patriots and the *Drapier*

Swift's the *Drapier's Letters*, written before *Gulliver's Travels*, had earlier caused the same public and popular outrage at British indifference to Ireland. Published under the pseudonym M B, the letters attack the English Whig government over giving patent to **William Wood**, an Englishman, through corrupt means to mint copper coins for Ireland. Swift and some of the Irish believed that the coins to be minted were going to be of an inferior quality, and that it would have had a devastating impact on the already fragile economy of Ireland, where hunger was common and famine frequent. Here, Swift, disguised as a Drapier, becomes the voice of resistance to the oppression by the English community in Ireland. He argues that the people of Ireland are born free, as free as the people of England (Oakleaf, 174). As an outcome of public uproar, Wood had to surrender his patent. It was a victory for the Irish patriots and the Drapier who had spoken for them. Despite his ambivalence to the Irish people and their cause, he began to be seen as an Irish patriot, who took up the cause of the Irish against the English misrule, gradually.

Writing satires has always been a perilous profession. It was a risky affair to expose the corruption of the powerful Whigs but Swift never shied away from giving a voice to the oppressed and the marginalised. Years later, in 1739, he did his own assessment in a self-reflective poem titled "*Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*". He wrote:

*Fair liberty was all his cry;
For her he stood prepared to die;
For her he boldly stood alone;
For her he oft exposed his own*

In Swift, on the one hand, we see an Englishman who condemns the Irish language and talks about its abolishment and replacement by English. And, on the other, we see an Anglo-Irish patriot who excoriates the English colonial administration for its economic and political wrongs done against Ireland. These contradictions and inconsistencies pose a challenge to his readers and literary historians.

Nevertheless, in his later years, he seems to be fascinated with the idea of liberty. He claims to have exposed “his own”, that is, Englishmen for the sake of liberty. As a neo-classicist, he chose the genre of satire to denounce his opponents and expose the corruption of the English. Since Swift always remained on the margins of society as a Tory, an Anglo-Irish, and as a Dean of an Irish church, his satires are characterised by resentment towards society. “Savage indignation” lies at the heart of his prose satires where he highlights the essential depravity of human beings. We examined Swift as a satirist and also said that many thought he was a misanthrope, but what or who is a misanthrope? Simply put a misanthrope is someone who in a sense hates/ detests humans/ mankind. But before using terms such as this, we need to know what it means and what it entails. If we are to call Swift a misanthrope, we would be suggesting that he hated humans whereas, that is not really true. He merely disliked/ detested/ hated the manner in which corrupt people were destroying society for their own gains. Let us discuss whether Swift can be called a misanthrope or a philanthropist next.

1.6 A MISANTHROPE OR A PHILANTHROPIST

Swift has been considered a mad misanthrope for his universal denunciation of mankind for years. Nevertheless, it would be unjust to judge a satirist so harshly, who devoted his life to expose the faults and hypocrisies of his times. It is a debatable question, however, whether he was a misanthrope or philanthropist. He could predict what his friends and foes would say about his death. He toyed with this idea and wrote “*Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*”, where the poet, like an objective observer, tries to foresee what others would say about him. Towards the concluding section of the poem he writes:

*He knew an hundred pleasant stories,
With all the turns of Whigs and Tories;
Was cheerful to his dying day,
And friends would let him have his way.
He gave the little wealth he had
To build a house for fools and mad,
And showed by one satiric touch,
No nation wanted it so much.*

The poet celebrates himself as a storyteller. But this celebration is accompanied by the painful realisation that both the Whigs and the Tories would be cheerful to hear the news of his death, for no nation loves satires and satirists. The poem, published in 1739, also highlights Swift’s philanthropic gesture towards that segment of society, which everyone despises and no one cares about. But he cares for the downtrodden, even for the fools and the madmen, and plans to give away the little wealth he has accumulated for their welfare.

Towards the end of his life, Swift was struck by senile disorders. In 1742, he was declared of unsound mind and memory – symptoms, perhaps of dementia. At the age of seventy-seven in 1745, Jonathan Swift died and was buried in St. Patrick’s Cathedral next to Stella, his erstwhile student, lifelong friend, and rumoured wife.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Thus, this unit has discussed at length Jonathan Swift’s eventful life and his major works. We have seen the historical circumstances in which Swift’s parents migrated from England to Ireland and became a part of the Anglo-Protestant community there. Although he always aspired to be the Bishop of a church in England, the

publication of *A Tale of a Tub*, ruined his prospects forever. Eventually, he decided to accept the offer of becoming a Dean in Ireland. The unit also shows how his views on Ireland were characterised by ambivalence. He stood up against the exploitation of Ireland by the English colonial administration and became a hero to the Irish. But he denounced Irish as the language of barbarians. Despite his English lineage, in the Irish cultural imagination, Jonathan Swift is celebrated as a patriot. He chose the medium of satire to articulate his grievances. The unit has explored the relationship between publication and secrecy in the production of satires. His biting satires are closer to those of the Latin satirist Juvenal. We have discussed terms like Whig and Tory, neoclassicism and satire. Although for a long time, Swift was called a mad misanthrope his poems suggest that he was a philanthropist, who chose to expose the hypocrisies of his age.

1.8 QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine Jonathan Swift's ambivalent attitude towards Ireland. As an Anglo-Irish, how did he respond to English colonialism in Ireland?
2. Define the term neoclassicism with reference to the similarities between Swift and the Roman satirist Juvenal.
3. What were the fundamental differences between Whigs and Tories? Critically comment with reference to Swift's proximity to the Tories.
4. Was Jonathan Swift a mad misanthrope or a philanthropist?

UNIT 2 *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*: PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 What is Enlightenment?
 - 2.2.1 Descartes, Kant, and Locke
 - 2.2.2 Abuse of Science and Reason
 - 2.2.3 A Horse is no Man
- 2.3 *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*
 - 2.3.1 The Question of Form
 - 2.3.2 A Travel Narrative or a Fiction Pretending to be a Travelogue
- 2.4 Swift and the Royal Society of London
- 2.5 Reception of Swift
 - 2.5.1 Swift and Gandhi
 - 2.5.2 Swift and Orwell
 - 2.5.3 Swift and Yeats
- 2.6 A Traditional Intellectual or an Organic Intellectual: Edward Said on Swift
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

I believe Gulliver's Travels has meant more to me than any other book ever written. I can't remember when I first read it, I must have been eight years old at the most, and it's lived with me ever since so that I suppose a year has never passed without my re-reading at least part of it.

George Orwell, "Jonathan Swift, an Imaginary Interview by George Orwell"

Gulliver's Travels (1726) is a neoclassical text that has attained the status of a classic over the years. This unit seeks to examine the philosophical and political context in which Swift had produced this monumental satire. While doing so, it also focuses on the different ways in which this book has been interpreted over centuries. A close analysis of its form helps us understand Swift's objective behind producing this prophetic text. We begin this unit with a discussion on the concept of the Enlightenment. Then, we analyse how Swift wrote against the dominant grain of the age and challenged some of the prominent values associated with the Enlightenment and modernity. Swift's polemical satire questions the binary opposition between men and animals, for he elevates the status of animals to the level of men, whereas his men are downgraded to animals. It also analyses in great detail the reception of Swift's magnum opus by subsequent authors and thinkers, including Mahatma Gandhi, George Orwell, W B Yeats, and Edward Said. A close examination of the reception of *Gulliver's Travels* is instrumental to study the reasons behind its popularity in contemporary times.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Gulliver's Travels is an extraordinarily modern text, which has been interpreted in multiple ways. The book has mesmerised readers for ages as a satire, child fable, novel, travelogue, parody of travelogue, proto-science fiction, and also as a brilliant spoof of science fiction. Several neoclassical poets and authors were known for innovating and experimenting with new forms in literature. Although it may be an upheaval task to classify it under a single genre, it is inarguably a satire against entire mankind. **Samuel H Monk** in his seminal essay "*The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver*" maintains that it is a satire on four aspects of man: the physical, the political, the intellectual and the moral. "I hate and detest that animal called man", wrote Swift in a letter to Alexander Pope on September 29, 1725. However, his hatred was not directed against individuals. He loved them whereas, he hated communities, nations, and species. His satire was an attempt, as he writes further in the same letter, to prove the falsity of the definition of man as animal rationale.

Man was an animal, indeed, in the worldview of the Anglo-Irish priest, who had witnessed the rapacious nature of the colonial rule in Ireland and the rampant corruption of the Whig government in England. As a result, he attributes human qualities to horses in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, whereas beastly, attributes are accorded to man, who he recasts as despicable creatures called Yahoos. Instead, Swift defines man as *racioniscapax*, which means that man has the capacity to act as a rational creature occasionally. His biting satire, as he writes further, was based upon this foundation of misanthropy. Since man shares both the rationality of angels and the sensuality of animals, he did not completely trust the species of man. The general hatred emanates from indignation against a race that "refuses to acknowledge the need for harmony, proportion, and a balance between its rational capacity and its animal instincts". The belief that human nature is corrupt stems from Swift's Anglican conservatism. His representation of humankind suggests not only the moral depravity inherent in life after the "Biblical Fall" but also the "continuing indulgence in the consequences of the Fall unchecked by reasoned self-discipline, an altruistic morality or divine grace" (Sanders, 285). While attacking the universal depravity of human beings, he questions and challenges the foundation of the Enlightenment. Having mentioned the Enlightenment, let's look into what the Enlightenment is all about.

2.2 WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

The Enlightenment refers to an intellectual and cultural movement that developed in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its adherents found "universal and uniform human reason adequate to solve the crucial problems and to establish the essential norms in life, together with the belief that the application of such reason was rapidly dissipating the darkness of superstition, prejudice and barbarity." Reason was widely perceived as a panacea for universal peace, happiness and freedom of humanity from authority and unexamined tradition (Abrams, 106).

2.2.1 Descartes, Kant, and Locke

In England, **Francis Bacon**, **John Locke**, and **Thomas Hobbes** were the major philosophers of the Enlightenment, who influenced their contemporary authors. "Have courage to use your own reason", writes **Immanuel Kant**, "was the motto of the Enlightenment". In a critically celebrated essay entitled "What is Enlightenment" (1784), Kant associates the Enlightenment with the freedom

to make public use of reason. Similarly, celebrating the overwhelming power of reason and thinking, the French thinker Rene Descartes (1596-1650) said, “*Cogito, ergo sum*”, that is, “I think, therefore I am”. The empiricist philosopher Locke argued in his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) that “since it is the understanding that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion which he has over them; it is certainly a subject, even for its nobleness, worth our labour to inquire into” (22). This theoretical proposition regarding human being’s ability to think and doubt separated him/her from animals and became an instrumental element of Western philosophy. Let us look into what may be called the abuse of science and reason next.

2.2.2 Abuse of Science and Reason

Contrary to the popular and the intellectual belief of his times, Swift was more interested in the abuse of science and reason done by none other than the custodians of reason. As a Tory sympathiser, he had witnessed the moral and political decadence of the Whig administration. In eighteenth century England, science and reason were widely and grossly misused in the brutal subjugation of the colonised and the powerless. The yardsticks used by the English government while administering justice to their subjects in England were utterly different from the punitive measures initiated against the inhabitants of the remotely located colony. Swift’s satire captures the biggest paradox of modernity, for reason and science became tools to subvert the principles of justice, equality and democracy. And therefore, as a critic of the Enlightenment thought, he challenged the notion that man was a rational creature and superior to other animals. The manner in which Swift’s satire works is something that is very remarkable and we see bits of it in the next section.

2.2.3 A Horse is no Man

“*A Man is no horse*” wrote Samuel Butler in his mock-heroic narrative poem entitled *Hudibras* (1684). In Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift strategically subverts the accepted wisdom that man is more rational than horses. In his world, horses are rational animals and superior to civilised humans whereas, the Yahoos - fictional representations of men, are barbarians. He seems to turn Butler’s remark upside down and conclude that a horse is no man. In the late seventeenth century, philosophers were preoccupied with the question of how to distinguish men from beasts; or what constitutes the essence of men? This problem is central to *Gulliver's Travels*, where the satirist compels the readers to ask a pertinent question: who is closer to the ideals of human – Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Yahoos, Houyhnhnms, or Gulliver? The line between an animal and a human is not neatly demarcated in Swift’s narrative. When the story starts, Gulliver is a proud Englishman but as the narrative progresses his excessive pride begins to deflate and puncture. His Eurocentric perspective of the world is torn apart and towards the end of story he begins to despise not only Englishmen but the entire species of mankind, including his family members. Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, travels and adventures bring him neither wealth nor wisdom. On the contrary, he loses everything, including the attachment he had for his country and family. Consequently, Gulliver finds solace nowhere else but amid the horses. Since Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is also a part of this course and also may be read as an adventure story and because the writers were contemporaries, a comparison between them would be but obvious.

2.3 *ROBINSON CRUSOE AND GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*

A comparison between the two texts entails a look at the form. The neoclassical poets and satirists experimented with literary forms and genres. Commonplace ideas might be tolerated by them, but the form or manner of expression must not be commonplace. In *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) Alexander Pope captured this sentiment:

*True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;*

He expected the poet's "true wit" to guarantee that when an author wrote on "what oft was thought" he did it in such a way that readers found it "ne'er so well expressed".

2.3.1 The Question of Form

The authors had the liberty to deal with a banal theme but the way of writing down accepted wisdom had to be original. The source of novelty, therefore, was not the content but the form. Swift, too, experiments with the genre of novel, travel narrative, and science-fiction in *Gulliver's Travels*. Although it is often read as a proto novel, it does not fulfil the criteria of a novel laid out by Swift's younger contemporary Johnson. Samuel Johnson defined novel in his celebrated *A Dictionary of the English language* (1755) as a "small tale, generally of love". Swift's satire deals with a wide range of issues but love is certainly not among them. The popularity of the genre of the novel in the eighteenth century stemmed from its ability to successfully persuade the readers that they were witnessing reality, true accounts of life. However hard Swift tried to conceal his identity as an author and make it appear as a work based upon true experience, he couldn't convince contemporary readers regarding the authenticity of the incidents described in the book. Although some might have believed his story, a priest immediately after its publication denounced it as a bunch of lies. He threw the book indignantly into the fire. Surprisingly, the priest rejected the element of fictionality in a work of fiction. This raises the question of whether *Gulliver's Travels* is a travel narrative or simply fiction, and we shall address that next.

2.3.2 A Travel Narrative or a Fiction Pretending to be a Travelogue

The story of *Gulliver* created confusion among the readers because *Gulliver's Travels* is not a real travel narrative but a fiction pretending to be a travelogue. It is a parody of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). In his book *The English Novel: an Introduction*, **Terry Eagleton** calls it "a savage spoof of the kind of travel-writing represented by *Robinson Crusoe*". Eighteenth-century travel-writing is considered in some ways a "progressive form, eager to investigate, exploit new technologies, acquire fresh knowledge and experience, and seize new opportunities for wealth. It centres on enterprise, optimism and self-sufficiency – all Whig-like, middle-class, commercialist values". *Gulliver's Travels*, on the contrary, is an "anti-progressive" work. Here, *Gulliver*, the amnesiac protagonist learns little, since he seems to start out on each of his travels as a blank slate. He barely learns from his experiences and undergoes all sorts of humiliation. The book does not have one seamless narrative like Defoe's novels, but it appears as a series of disconnected narratives. *Robinson Crusoe* is a capitalist hero who

becomes richer after his travels but in a parody of the travel book's optimism, Gulliver loses everything, including his sanity (34). Let us now look at Swift and how he was located in London society of the times in the next section.

2.4 SWIFT AND THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON

Swift parodies not only the genre of the novel and the travelogue but also the scientists of his times. *Gulliver's Travels* may be read as a work of proto-science fiction as well as a satire on experimental philosophy that was being promoted by the Royal Society of London. Underlining Swift's approach to the scientific experiments, Rebekah Higgitt writes in *The Guardian*:

In many ways the whole of Gulliver's Travels is a satire on the scientific approach of the Royal Society. It is presented as a travel narrative, reporting on extraordinary sights and experiences in foreign lands in a calm, detached and, whenever possible, quantitative fashion. The Royal Society had often encouraged travellers to make such records and reported on information collected in circumstances that ranged across formal experiment, mathematical proof, astronomical observation, field work, library work, happenstance and even hearsay.

Swift was concerned with the moral dimensions of science and philosophy. If scientific and philosophical experiments do not address the day-to-day concerns of the masses, they are utterly futile. His trenchant critique of scientific pursuits sans morality, of colonialism, political absolutism, authoritarianism, and of modern civilisation made him popular across the globe. In later years, Mahatma Gandhi could empathise with Swift's critique of modern civilisation and colonialism whereas George Orwell appreciated the Irish author's denunciation of totalitarian regimes, mainly in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*. The next section looks at how some of the major thinkers and writers all over the world have approached Swift and his politics and philosophy.

2.5 RECEPTION OF SWIFT

The reception of Jonathan Swift's masterpiece across the globe has been as intriguing as the book itself. Authoritarian regimes dreaded and disliked his satire whereas anti-colonial thinkers and liberals celebrated it from their perspectives.

2.5.1 Swift and Gandhi

For instance, immediately after its publication in Portugal, *Gulliver's Travels* was adjudged a subversive text by the authorities. The ruling dispensation of Portugal had established a system of statutory censorship under which all printed materials required license of both the State and the Church, and Swift seemed far from being innocuous to either. In 1770, Swift was included in a list of authors that the state sought to ban, along with **Fontenelle**, **Spinoza**, **Locke**, Descartes, **Rousseau**, **Voltaire** and other Enlightenment literati (Hermann, 91). In India, Gandhi understood the subversive potential of Swift's biting satire.

While reading Swift in India, one may wonder why an Indian student should bother at all about what an Irish priest had to say in an eighteenth-century topical satire. A good starting point to resolve this quandary could be to examine Gandhi's views on Swift. Gandhi's eclectic philosophy and egalitarian worldview were forged by several thinkers and writers. Although scholars and social scientists have analysed such thinkers in great detail, one such author was Swift, whose

influence on Gandhi is yet to be investigated thoroughly, (Kumar L., “Gandhi and Gulliver’s Travels: an Indian Saint and an Irish Priest” the Indian Express).

Mahatma Gandhi in a letter dated May 18, 1911, advised his nephew and disciple, Maganlal Gandhi, to read Jonathan Swift’s masterpiece *Gulliver’s Travels* again and again:

Gulliver’s Travels contains so effective a condemnation, in an ironic vein, of modern civilization that the book deserves to be read again and again. It is a very well-known book in the English language. Children can read it with enjoyment, so simple it is; and the wise ones get dizzy trying to comprehend its hidden significance. In Brobdingnag, Gulliver tumbled as low as he had risen high in Lilliput. Even in Lilliput, he has represented the tiny people as possessing powers which were superior to his own, that is to say, to those of normal people. (77-78)

One may wonder why Gandhi, then a civil rights activist residing in South Africa, would recommend a satire to his twenty-eight-year-old close associate **Maganlal**. In Gandhi’s letters, the effusive praise for Swift is a refrain, for in *Gulliver’s Travels* he found an “effective condemnation” of modern civilisation and colonial modernity. Though Gandhi’s worldview was forged by several authors like **Ruskin, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Marx**, and others, Swift was the only one, who like Gandhi, directly suffered and stood up to British colonialism. His fascination with Swift’s quasi-travelogue allows us to revisit and unearth not only the similarities between the Indian saint and the Irish priest but also its relevance in contemporary times.

It is self-evident that modern civilisation is characterised by industrialisation, imperialism, rationalism, individualism, and the promotion of scientific culture. Jonathan Swift’s views on colonialism, modernity, authoritarianism, science and governance appear to have immensely influenced Gandhi during his formative years in South Africa (1893-1914).

Swift and Gandhi both were incisive critics of colonialism; both perceived the achievements of modernity and the Enlightenment sceptically; both of them acknowledged the role of religion in shaping their viewpoints. They thought of rationalism as a false and destructive doctrine. They also shared the double burden of being both victims as well as beneficiaries of colonial modernity. Initially, during his stay in England as a law student, a young Gandhi lived like an Englishman, wore a suit, kept a silver-headed cane and took lessons in dancing and violin. When he reached South Africa as a young barrister in 1893, he thought of himself “as a Briton first and an Indian Second,” writes *Arthur Herman* in his book *Gandhi and Churchill* (2008). But soon the cultural pride that Gandhi drew on his English education and way of life began to fade away after undergoing racial discrimination, when he was thrown off the first - class compartment of a train at Pietermaritzburg.

Though as a white man, Swift did not have to undergo any kind of racial discrimination yet, Ireland was brutally subjugated by England in every possible way. Swift, initially, was proud of his identity as an Englishman and constantly sought favour from the British establishment. During his stay in Ireland, he didn’t take up the cause of the local Irish population but he spoke for the white settlers, a community he himself was a part of. To please the British Queen, he even wrote a pamphlet *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), an allegory on various branches of Christianity. To his utmost surprise, the satirical representation of the English Church infuriated Queen Anne so much that all his chances of promotion within

the English Church ended forever. What Pietermaritzburg did to Gandhi, *A Tale of a Tub* did to Swift, making him painfully aware of his colonised identity.

This publishing debacle has been humorously fictionalised in *Gulliver's Travels*, where Swift briefly recasts himself as Gulliver and the British Queen as the Queen of the imaginary island Lilliput. On the one hand, Swift's pamphlet scandalised the queen, and on the other, his fictional creation Gulliver had to face the wrath of the queen of Lilliput for extinguishing the palace fire by urinating on it. There are several parallels between Swift's gradual disenchantment with his English lineage and Gandhi's disillusionment with a borrowed English identity.

Swift satirises the colonisation of Ireland in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, with reference to a flying island called Laputa. The island, a fictional representation of England, symbolises a totalitarian state, which is totally divorced from its subjects, and chooses to govern its subjects scientifically, and not morally. Governance without morality invariably leads to an authoritarian state. The self-absorbed Laputan King and his entourage may be disconnected from the real world but they are quick enough to crush any rebellion by ensuring the universal destruction of the dissenting subjects. Swift's critique of a totalitarian regime and a politically absolutist state not only fascinated those who directly had to undergo the experiences of colonialism but also George Orwell. It was not for nothing that in "*Politics vs Literature: An Examination of Gulliver's Travels*" (1946), Orwell praises Swift for satirising political authoritarianism.

Swift examines the dire consequences of divorcing science and governance from morality and the immediate concerns of the masses. The scientists of the island are so absorbed in their unproductive pursuits like extracting sunshine out of cucumber, or reducing human excrement to its original food that they cannot even address their practical needs of speaking and listening. They hire a domestic servant who tells them when to listen or to speak. Their bizarre and illogical experiments lead to large swathes of barren land and impoverished masses.

Swift, as a satirist and master of irony, takes his critique of abstract science to an extreme, and enables the readers to easily comprehend the absurd ways of a totalitarian state. It was this impoverished and shallow morality of modern civilisation and colonial state that Gandhi denounced in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) as fundamentally rotten. Gandhi calls modern civilisation "Satanic", "a Black Age," for it primarily focuses on securing bodily comforts but fails miserably even in doing so. He unambiguously and plainly rejects the imperialist, exploitative, materialistic, individualistic and violent side of the machine-driven age as directionless and purposeless. Though the idea that an abstract science and philosophy in an absolutist state may lead to unspeakable violence originated in eighteenth century Europe, it became a harsh reality for Indians during the heyday of colonialism. This Swiftian narrative became a recurring metaphor in Gandhi's oeuvre.

Swift and Gandhi were poles apart. Swift believed in the essential depravity of mankind whereas Gandhi believed in the essential goodness of humankind. Swift's work was characterised by indignation whereas Gandhi's writings were informed by love and non-violence. Unlike Gandhi, Swift was a writer and a priest, not an activist. He hardly did anything to challenge British colonialism except writing political satires. The Irish author turned against the empire only when his chances to become the Bishop of an English church ended forever. Although he despised turncoats, the denial of promotion turned him into a malcontent. Nevertheless, Swift was celebrated later on as an Irish patriot, as someone who opposed the mighty British Empire through his biting prose satires. It is not surprising that W

B Yeats (1865-1939), an Irish poet, not only translated Swift's self-written epitaph from Latin into English but also celebrated him as a champion of Irish nationalism. Although Swift and Gandhi operated on two different plains altogether, it was the anti-colonial stance of the Irish author and his ability to foreground the evil side of modernity that influenced Gandhi. This aspect of Swift will continue to mesmerise readers in India and others parts of the world, where the atrocities committed by the Empire during the heyday of colonialism are still fresh in public memory. Let us now look at Swift and Orwell next.

2.5.2 Swift and Orwell

George Orwell admired both Gandhi and Swift. Yet, he was equally critical of both of them. Gandhi's appreciation for Swift's critique of modern civilisation is something that Orwell may not have liked. Although it is not clear whether Orwell was familiar with Gandhi's reading of Swift, he rejects Gandhi's emphasis on home-spun cloth and vegetarianism as a medievalist programme for a starving country in his essay "*Reflections on Gandhi*". As a British official, Orwell conveniently forgets that the wrong policies of his government were responsible for the hunger and starvation of millions of Indians. The same policies caused famine and rampant poverty in Ireland, which was brutally plundered by an absolutist regime of England. Swift had observed this loot closely.

"Swift's greatest contribution to political thought" writes George Orwell, "in the narrower sense of the words, is his attack, especially in Book III, on what would now be called totalitarianism" (*Politics vs Literature*, 213). In Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, there is a Professor at the School of Political Projectors, who claims before Gulliver that one could discover people's secret thoughts by examining their excrements. He shows his visitor "a large Paper of Instructions for discovering Plots and Conspiracies against the Government". The Professor instructs all the statesmen to keep an eye on the diet and timing of eating of all suspected persons. To detect the conspiracies, he observes people's faeces:

Because Men are never so serious, thoughtful, and intent, as when they are at stool; which he found by frequent Experiment: for in such Conjectures, when he used merely as a Trial to consider which was the best Way of murdering the King, his Ordure would have a Tincture of Green; but quite different when he thought only of raising an Insurrection or burning the Metropolis. (Swift, 178)

This is an allegorical representation of the complicity between science and the modern state in controlling and subjugating the subject. Orwell examines this passage in his essay "*Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of Gulliver's Travels*", closely and argues that Swift could foresee the spy-haunted police state, with its endless treason trials. Further, Orwell finds in Houyhnhnms the highest stage of totalitarian organisation, the stage when conformity has become so general that there is no need for a police force. Houyhnhnms had no word for "opinion" in their language as there was no room for disagreement among them. The only question they were required to discuss was how to treat Yahoos. Such episodes must have inspired Orwell to produce his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which deals with the theme of state surveillance and propaganda of a totalitarian state.

Apart from his satires, Swift's sermons (only a few of which have survived) provide us with his views on the pillars of 18th century society: monarchy, government, and party. His sermons capture the justified fears he had in the potential destruction of the Constitution, the dangers of anarchy, and the rise of

absolutism. He shared the sentiments of the political theorist John Locke, whose second *Treatise on Civil Government* (1690), emphasises the principles of civil liberty and human rights underlying the Revolution of 1688. Locke and Swift both promote and authenticate the principles that justified the actions taken against Charles I and **James II**, since these kings had acted arbitrarily and violated the laws of the land (Degategno, 267). During his younger days, as a Whig, Swift supported Locke's views on revolution but later he became a Tory sympathiser and attacked liberals and conservatives alike, especially the ongoing conflict between Whigs and Tories. Consequently, Orwell calls him a rebel, an iconoclast, a Tory anarchist, who despised authority while disbelieving in liberty. Inconsistency is a hallmark of both Gulliver as well as Swift. However, for Orwell, who had read it first as an eight-year-old boy, Gulliver's Travels was a book he was never tired of reading. Both Gandhi and Swift, then, enjoyed reading this classic again and again owing to its contemporaneity. Yet another important literary giant needs to be examined and that giant was W B Yeats, the Irish poet. Let's do that next.

2.5.3 Swift and Yeats

W B Yeats was conscious of his Irish literary heritage, comprising the works of philosopher **George Berkley**, **Oliver Goldsmith**, **Edmund Burke**, and Jonathan Swift "with his love of perfect nature, of the Houyhnhnms, his disbelief in Newton's system and every sort of machine". They all had a lasting influence on him (Yeats, 402). The presence of such predecessors helped Yeats create a strong Irish identity, which became instrumental for Irish nationalism. He shared Swift's indignation against the colonial administration. "No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive, there are moments when hatred poisons my life and I accuse myself of effeminacy because I have not given it adequate expression", writes W B Yeats. He may not have given expression to overwhelming anger in his poetry as strongly as Swift did yet, he reflects on what he calls "Irish hatred and solitude, the hatred of human life that made Swift write Gulliver and the epitaph upon his tomb" (519). Yeats places Swift at the heart of Irish literary canon and calls his epitaph written in Latin more immortal than his pamphlets, perhaps more powerful than even his great allegory. He believed that "now and then in history some man will speak a few simple sentences which never die, because his life gives them energy and meaning." Swift's self-reflective comment in his epitaph that "He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more" was a classic example of such a sentence for Yeats. The epitaph, Yeats wrote, made him question his sanity (308). Swift, then, appealed to Yeats for mainly three reasons: for his critique of British colonialism, his Epitaph, and above all, for his defence of Anglo-Protestant belief. Yeats, too, was committed to the cultural ascendancy of the politics of Anglo-Irish Protestants in the beginning of the twentieth century. This fascination led him to write a one-act play about Swift titled *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, for his Irish predecessor becomes a haunting presence for him both on-stage in his plays and off-stage in his life. The next section will look at the relationship between a more contemporary writer and Swift – Edward Said.

2.6 A TRADITIONAL INTELLECTUAL OR AN ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL: EDWARD SAID ON SWIFT

Edward Said, another modern thinker, who read Swift owing to his appeal in modern times associates Swift with "Tory anarchy", though Swift never called himself a Tory despite sympathising with them. At certain stages in their careers,

Said writes, Defoe and Johnson were pamphleteers and public figures but neither of them was visibly affiliated with a political party as Swift was with the Tory government between 1711 and 1713 (83). Since the Irish author had no avenue to achieve social mobility outside the church except through either state patronage or polemical writing for a particular party, a neutral political stance was not an alternative for him. Said calls Swift both a traditional intellectual as well as an organic intellectual:

From a class standpoint, then, Swift was a traditional intellectual—a cleric—but what makes him unique is that unlike almost any other major writer in the whole of English literature (except possibly for Steele) he was also an extraordinarily important organic intellectual because of his closeness to real political power. (83)

But despite this apparent proximity to political power, Swift did not manage to get a promotion within the English Church. The respectable post of Dean within the Irish Church was the only alternative that he had. As a Palestine born American, Edward Said himself enjoyed a position of privilege from which he spoke for the less privileged. His position at Columbia University perhaps provides an analogy to Swift's office as Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral (Oakleaf, 7). Thus, Swift has continued to fascinate modern readers, for they read him from their perspective and find an analogy and solution to the problems that they face in contemporary times. Postcolonial thinkers, animal rights activists, children, scientists, novelists, malcontents, intellectuals victimised by the state, and readers from the erstwhile colonies empathise with Swift even today.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

Thus, this unit has analysed at length Swift's views on philosophy, science, and politics. It has discussed the Enlightenment and situated Swift in the context of some of the intellectual debates of his age. We have seen how Swift challenged the fundamental tenets of the Enlightenment, especially people's excessive faith in reason and science, as they turned out to be inadequate in providing a solution to the problems faced by them. For Swift, rationality is not inherent in human beings but they are capable of acting in a rational manner occasionally. But when they fail to do so, they are worse than animals. He questions the binary between man and animal, which was at the heart of the Enlightenment. We have seen why Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* and how one may read it as a parody of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The unit discussed at length the ways in which modern thinkers and authors, including Gandhi, Orwell, Yeats, and Said have tried to understand Swift's political views and his critique of the scientists of his times. Swift is as popular today as he was in his times. His universal appeal stems from the fact that the subsequent generation of authors and political thinkers find in him a voice that addresses their own experience of colonial atrocities and totalitarian regimes directly.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. What is Enlightenment? How does Swift question certain values associated with the Enlightenment and modernity?
2. Does Swift help us question the binary between a man and an animal? Critically examine?
3. How does Orwell find in Swift a critique of totalitarian regimes?
4. Swift's views on science, politics, philosophy and travel writing have inspired thinkers across the globe. Critically discuss.

UNIT 3 *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*: BOOKS I – III: CHARACTERS, SUMMARY, THEMES, AND ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Analysis of Important Characters
- 3.3 *Gulliver's Travels*: Book I and Book II
 - 3.3.1 Summary and Analysis
 - 3.3.2 "Little Odious Vermin"
 - 3.3.3 "Big Men and Little Men"
 - 3.3.4 "Whose Dog are You?"
- 3.4 *Gulliver's Travels*, Book III: Summary
- 3.5 Themes and Analysis
 - 3.5.1 Science for Science's Sake
 - 3.5.2 Laputa: An Absolutist State
 - 3.5.3 "Prostitute Writers": Swift on Modern History
 - 3.5.4 Gulliver's Disillusionment with Immortality
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit seeks to examine critically the major themes of *Gulliver's Travels*, especially of Book III. It begins with a brief analysis of the main characters of all four books. The description of prominent characters is followed by a discussion on Book I and Book II of the satire. A recurring trope in these two books is the relation between size and virtue, for the physical constitutes the moral. The unit refers to Samuel Johnson's remark on the idea of size in Swift and his distaste for and disapproval of this polemical satire. Having discussed the first half of the book, we move on to a detailed summary of Book III in which Gulliver goes to a flying island called Laputa. The last section of the unit deals with the important themes and motifs of Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, namely the misuse of science and rationality, colonialism, history writing, Swift's misogyny, Gulliver's disenchantment with the notion of immortality, and the continuity between the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome and the neoclassical age. In conclusion, the unit will show us how prophetic and relevant Swift's ideas have turned out to be for contemporary readers.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gulliver's Travels tells the tale of Gulliver's transformation from a proud Englishman to a misanthrope. The entire book is divided into four books: Gulliver's voyage to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the Houyhnhnms. Since it lacks a proper plot, the book appears to be a series of four disconnected narratives. However, one may find some recurring themes, motifs, and metaphors. Books I and II can be read together as a topical as well as a universal satire on the

corrupt Whig administration and depravity of man. On the other hand, we may read Books III and IV together as Swift's incisive critique of English colonialism, authoritarianism, and the abuse of science and reason. They help us understand Swift's views on the Royal Society of London and England's treatment of its colony - Ireland. Although Gulliver's narrative is characterised by inconsistencies, Swift's anti-colonial tirade is a recurring trope in all four books. Swift explores the dire consequences of separating morality from science in Book III. Scientists and philosophers of Laputa are so absorbed in their research that they cannot take care of their immediate needs. He seems to caution readers against excessive scientific experiments and innovations. Let us begin the analysis of the important characters next.

3.2 ANALYSIS OF IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Don Pedro De Mendez – is the generous Portuguese captain who brings Gulliver back to England after he is compelled to leave the land of the Houyhnhnms who consider him a Yahoo. He is generous and offers Gulliver his clothes. But surprisingly Gulliver thinks of him as a Yahoo, for he begins to empathise only with horses.

Emperor of Lilliput – The emperor of Lilliput is twenty-eight years old. Like his subjects, he is six inches tall and has reigned for seven years. He is vengeful, spiteful, and hungry for more power. He wants to defeat the neighbouring kingdom of Blefuscu and seeks Gulliver's assistance in expanding his territory. But when Gulliver refuses to help him in defeating the neighbouring empire, he turns against Gulliver and accuses him of treason. An impeachment is brought against him. The emperor is against capital punishment hence it is decided that Gulliver will be blinded and starved to death. But he escapes before the execution. The conflict between Lilliput and Blefuscu is an allegorical representation of the old rivalry between England and France.

Flimnap – He is the treasurer of Lilliput, who turns against Gulliver because the state has to spend an enormous amount of money on feeding the "Man-Mountain". He believes the absurd idea that Gulliver is having an affair with his wife and they meet in a private place. It never occurs to him, that his wife is only six inches tall whereas Gulliver is six feet. The accusation appears even more absurd when Gulliver defends himself without referring to the disproportion of size between them. He is a fictional representation of the Whig Prime Minister Robert Walpole.

Glumdalclitch – In Book II, she is the nine-year-old daughter of a farmer, who discovers Gulliver in Brobdingnag. She is forty feet tall but takes care of tiny Gulliver gently. She makes him several sets of tiny clothes. When the queen buys Gulliver, she continues to look after him. While her father reduces Gulliver to a public spectacle and makes a profit out of him, she treats him as a toy.

Gulliver – Lemuel Gulliver is the gullible narrator and protagonist of the story. He is both a character as well as Swift's mouthpiece. Trained as a surgeon, he decides to undertake four voyages one after another. When he begins his first voyage, he is a proud Englishman but after meeting Houyhnhnms and Yahoos in Book IV, he develops antipathy towards mankind. He constantly draws a parallel between England and the new islands that he discovers and considers England initially superior to the places he visits. He is an amnesiac narrator who hardly learns from his experiences. Upon his return to England, he begins to despise humans and finds comfort amidst horses. Gulliver's desire to undertake new adventures despite facing humiliation and sexual abuse is indicative of the eighteenth-century preoccupation with travels and exploration of new territories.

Houyhnhnms – They are horse-like creatures in Book IV of the book. Disputes, dubious propositions, controversies, falsehood, and such other vices are utterly unknown in the Utopian world in which these rational creatures live. Their vocabulary is very limited. They have no word for lying and cheating, for such vices do not exist there. Governed by reason, they live a virtuous life and look down upon Gulliver as a Yahoo.

King of Brobdingnag – Brobdingnagians are sixty-foot tall creatures. Gulliver appears an insect or a tiny creature before them. Their king is a morally upright person who is shocked when Gulliver, a tiny creature, proposes to teach him how to make gunpowder and use it against his enemies. He rejects Gulliver's offer, for he is reluctant to defeat his neighbouring princes and destroy them. He is very different from the king of Lilliput. Since the solicitous king is a man of principles, he is closer to the ideals of man. He is superior to Gulliver both physically and morally.

Munodi – Lord Munodi is from an extremely important family in Balnibarbi, in Laputa. He is the most sensible and rational creature in the kingdom who believes in applied science. But he is denounced as the most ignorant and stupid person of the province for his emphasis on practical side of knowledge. He is the host of Gulliver and shows him several places in Book III. He falls from grace due to his practical approach to agriculture in Lagado where unproductive and unfruitful agricultural methods are encouraged. Gulliver does not find one ear of corn or blade of grass in the entire city but when he comes to Munodi's estate, he finds vineyards, corn-grounds, and meadows. But his countrymen ridicule and despise him for managing his affairs well.

Yahoos – Allegorical representations of men in the state of nature. In Book IV, they are despicable creatures resembling men. They eat raw meat and fornicate. Houyhnhnms have tamed them but are not able to civilise them completely. They are naked, filthy, and live like beasts. A female Yahoo is the epitome of ugliness. Yahoos repel Gulliver with their voracious sexual appetite, especially when a Yahoo girl pounces on him while he is bathing naked. But, to his utter dismay, Houyhnhnms consider him a Yahoo. Although they are surprised to see a civilised Yahoo, they cannot keep Gulliver on their island forever and ask him to leave.

Reldresal – The Secretary of Private Affairs in Lilliput, Reldresal, befriends Gulliver and explains to Gulliver the history of the political conflict between the two major factions in the realm: the High-Heels and the Low-Heels. The clash between these two parties is a fictional representation of the political factionalism between the Whigs and the Tories. When an impeachment is brought against Gulliver, Reldresal argues for a less severe punishment than death – gouging out his eyes instead.

Skyresh Bolgolam – Unlike Reldresal, Bolgolam, the high admiral of Lilliput, shows hostility towards Gulliver from the very beginning. He is filled with envy when Gulliver captures the fleet of Blefescu. He is in favour of awarding capital punishment to the "Man-Mountain" for his alleged crime.

Struldbruggs – Are a group of people who are immortal but they do not remain young forever. Eternity turns out to be a curse for them. According to the law of the Luggnagg, they become legally dead at eighty. Their marriage also stands dissolved at that age and they can no longer hold property. Since language changes over a period of time, they have difficulties communicating with the younger generation. In short, immortality is not celebrated by them. Let us now look at Books I and II of Gulliver's Travels next.

3.3 *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS: BOOKS I AND II*

Gulliver's Travels claims to tell the story of a surgeon, Lemuel Gulliver's four voyages to several remote nations of the world. The author uses fictional maps, letters, and a detailed biographical account of the narrator along with a description of England to prove the authenticity of this work as a travelogue.

3.3.1 Summary and Analysis

Book I deals with Gulliver's journey to Lilliput, an island where people are six inches tall whereas in Book II he accidentally reaches an island inhabited by people who are sixty feet tall, so he appears a tiny dwarf. After the shipwreck in Book I, while he is asleep on the shore, thousands of Lilliputians tie him to the ground. They shoot tiny arrows at him. Later on, he is fed well and taken to an ancient temple. People call him "the Great Mountain Man". Gulliver gradually learns their language and gets to know about their laws, customs, educational system and the political and religious factions. On the one hand, there are two political parties: the high heels and the low heels. And on the other, there are two religious groups: the Big-Endians and the Little-Endians. The latter is a satirical representation of the religious conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants. Gulliver helps the emperor defeat the neighbouring empire of Blefescu by capturing their fleet of ships but he refuses to annihilate them. He also douses the fire that erupted in the queen's palace by urinating on it but this incident infuriates the queen. An impeachment is brought against him. He is to be blinded and slowly starved to death but he escapes before the execution takes place. An English ship rescues him and brings him home where he shows off the tiny sheep and other cattle that he has brought in his pocket from Lilliput.

3.3.2 "Little Odious Vermin"

Book I gives us a glimpse of the diminutive form of man whereas Book II shows us the magnified version of man. Within two months of his return, Gulliver sets off on another journey and is left alone on the island of Brobdingnag, where he is discovered by a farmer. What Gulliver is to Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians are to Gulliver. Size becomes a matter of perspective here. The notion of objective truth is questioned. What we see is determined by how we see it.

In Book II, Gulliver is made to undergo a series of humiliations, one after the other. The farmer makes money out of his performances in the market where he becomes tired and ill from the strain of performing again and again. A dwarf drops him into a large bowl of cream. A monkey thinks of Gulliver as a baby and force-feeds him. He is attacked by flies, rats, and wasps. He is sold like a commodity and sexually abused. Readers may observe that there is barely any difference between Gulliver using the cattle of Lilliput for spectacle and a profit-making exercise in England and the farmer abusing him in a similar fashion. He is treated by the farmer as an animal. Later when the queen buys him, she is surprised to see wit and common sense in such a diminutive animal.

Despite being subjected to numerous indignities, he continues to remain proud of his English identity and wishes to have the tongue of great orators like Demosthenes or Cicero so that he may praise his country eloquently. He has a Eurocentric perspective of the world from the outset. He offers the king his services in teaching his men how to make gunpowder. The king is appalled to see that a tiny creature has such destructive ideas. Although Gulliver attempts to create a favourable impression of his country on the king, he fails miserably when the king of Brobdingnag tells him in Book II, "My little Friend Gildrig;

you have made a most admirable Panegyric upon your Country. You have clearly proved that Ignorance, Idleness, and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator.” There is a huge gap between what Gulliver intends to convey and what he ends up conveying to the king. This gap constitutes Swiftian irony. The king’s invective against Gulliver’s countrymen continues as he condemns them as “the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth” (120-21). Thus, Gulliver and his countrymen are perceived by the king as a race of vermin, as insects, which crawl and creep upon the earth. The dignity of man is attacked, for the size of six inches and sixty feet becomes an indicator of man’s virtue. The king of Brobdingnag is superior to his counterpart in Lilliput both physically and morally.

3.3.3 “Big Men and Little Men”

James Boswell, the acclaimed biographer of Samuel Johnson, in his biography entitled *The Life of Johnson* (1791) has discussed Dr Johnson’s distaste for *Gulliver’s Travels*. “When once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest”, said Johnson scornfully. Swift’s masterpiece, then, in Johnson’s viewpoint, could be reduced to the principles of diminution and magnification. Size, is, undoubtedly, an important metaphor in the book. The physical and the moral are interconnected in the worldview of Swift. Lilliputians are inferior to Gulliver both physically and morally whereas Brobdingnagians are superior to both in every respect. But Johnson failed to observe that there is more to Gulliver’s Travels than “big men and little men”.

Johnson’s list of rejected novels was quite long. He was equally dismissive of Lawrence Sterne’s experimental novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759) about which he prophesied, “Nothing odd will do long”. Johnson was indisputably an eminent literary critic but he was no prophet. *Tristram Shandy* and *Gulliver’s Travels* both were neither as simple nor as odd as he thought. They continue to remain the most influential and widely admired books of the eighteenth century. What is more important than the concept of size, the theory of perspectivism, and rebuttal of the notion of objective truth in Book I and Book II, is Swift’s critique of party politics and religious factionalism.

3.3.4 “Whose Dog are You?”

Satirists, novelists, and poets in the eighteenth century England had no other option except supporting the Whigs or the Tories, the Catholics or the Protestants. They invariably needed a powerful patron to escape censorship and state persecution. Without having the support of a mighty group one always remained vulnerable. Pope, Swift, Dryden, Defoe and several others faced this dilemma and decided to extend their covert or overt support to some group or the other. What mattered in Swift’s England was whom you belonged to. The little couplet Alexander Pope mockingly wrote to put on one of the queen’s little pugs, could have applied in earnest in the world that Swift and Pope inhabited:

*I am his Highness’ dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?*

(Cited in Stephen Greenblatt’s The Swerve, Chapter I. Though Greenblatt uses this couplet to capture the predicament of the inhabitants of the fifteenth century Europe regarding their political affiliation, it was equally applicable to Swift’s world).

The predicament that the authors of eighteenth century England faced between choosing Whig or Tory, between supporting the parliament or the monarchy has

been the concern of the intellectuals since antiquity. It has not lost its relevance even in modern times. In Book I, though Gulliver overtly supports the emperor of Lilliput, several courtiers suspect that his sympathies lie with their opponents. The admiral who wants capital punishment for Gulliver believes that in his heart “he is a Big-Endian” and treason begins in the heart. Pope’s remark that “Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory” captured the quandary of every writer of his age. Swift was both its victim as well as the beneficiary. As a Tory sympathiser, he did not shy away from satirising those in power. George Orwell calls Book I a satire on human greatness. It’s a satire both on human greatness as well as a pretence of greatness of the Whig Prime Minister Robert Walpole whose decadent court is allegorically represented by the Lilliputian court where various ludicrous exercises are undertaken. On the other hand, the king of Brobdingnag is an efficient ruler, for he has understood that the art of governance is based upon moral principles and not on scientific principles. Hence, he does not reduce politics to science. In Book III, Laputans commit the folly of governing their subjects by scientific and not by moral principles. Consequently, they represent an autocratic state and perpetrate all sorts of violence against their subjects. A discussion on Book III of *Gulliver's Travels* follows next.

3.4 *GULLIVER’S TRAVELS, BOOK III: SUMMARY*

Upon his return from the second voyage, Gulliver barely spends ten days at home when his friend Captain William Robinson pays him a visit and persuades him to embark on another voyage. Gulliver craves to see the world and therefore, despite his past misfortunes his passion for travelling remains unabated. Their ship is attacked by pirates after surviving a fierce storm. The pirates set Gulliver adrift in a canoe with a modest amount of food. Soon, he reaches the island of Balnibarbi near Japan, a province of the flying island called Laputa, ruled by a king and dominated by philosophers. They are mainly interested in science and music. These philosophers are more concerned with theoretical principles than their application to day-to-day life. They are so engrossed in scientific and philosophical pursuits that they can neither speak nor listen to others without some external help. They have hired a servant called Flapper whose job is to strike the mouth of his master gently when he is to speak and the right ear of the person when he is supposed to listen. Adultery committed by women is quite common on the island, for the husband is invariably absorbed in philosophical speculations. Meanwhile, the wives and daughters lament their confinement to the island. Once they leave the flying island and go to the towns located below, it becomes difficult to persuade them to return.

When the island reaches the capital city of Lagado, it stops over towns and villages at the behest of the king to receive petitions of the subjects. If a town ever engages in rebellion and refuses to pay the tribute, the king has two methods of subjugating them. One is by making the island hover over the town for a long time to deprive its inhabitants of the benefit of the sunshine and the rain. And the other is to pelt heavy stones at them against which they have no defense except for creeping into caves.

Gulliver leaves Laputa and visits Lord Munodi, a former governor of Lagado. Munodi is treated as an outcast and condemned as stupid and ignorant for applying scientific theories to practice. Gulliver visits the town and observes that the houses there are built strangely and they need immediate repair. The people walk fast with their eyes fixed. They are in rags and look wild. The labourers work with several tools but they fail to grow either corn or grass. However,

Munodi manages his estate well but he is ridiculed by people who discourage any fruitful activity. Following this, Gulliver is taken to the Grand Academy of Lagado, where Gulliver meets a scientist who has been working upon a project to extract sunbeam out of cucumber for eight years. He is hopeful that in the next eight years, he would be able to supply the Governor's garden with sunshine at a reasonable rate. Another researcher attempts to propagate a breed of naked sheep. While scientists are occupied with research the whole country is in ruins and people are forced to live without food or clothes.

There is a scientist who intends to replace words by objects and gradually abolish all the words. Since words are only names for things, he proposes to carry things that will signify words. Consequently, people will need to carry a bundle of things upon their back. This particular episode is a spoof on the Royal Society of London, which was a scientific academy founded in 1660. Its members included the astronomer **Edmund Halley** and the scientist **Isaac Newton**. Thomas Sprat in his book *The History of the Royal Society of London* (1667) rejects all the amplifications and digressions in language and proposes to return to the primitive purity and shortness, "when men delivered so many things almost in an equal number of words". Several language reformers have used the slogan "So many words, so many things" while advocating the use of bare prose. Swift as a Tory conservative satirises this innovation in language by foregrounding its eccentricity in the Academy of Lagado. He compels the readers to imagine a dystopian universe in which words will be replaced by things. Although the Royal Society promoted scientific preciseness in language and did not stand for the abolition of words altogether, Swift, nevertheless, ridicules this proposition.

Gulliver leaves Lagado shortly afterwards and undertakes a short voyage to Glubbudbrib, the island of sorcerers. Several kinds of black magic are performed here. The magicians can even call eminent personalities back from the dead. Gulliver gets to see Homer, Aristotle, **Alexander the Great**, **Caesar**, **Brutus**, and **Pompey** and is mesmerised at this sight. He continues to call and examine several luminaries from the dead and concludes that historical accounts of great men's lives are often inaccurate:

I was chiefly disgusted with modern History. For having strictly examined all the Persons of greatest Name in the Courts of Princes for an Hundred Years past, I found how the World had been misled by prostitute Writers, to ascribe the greatest Exploits in War to Cowards, the wisest Counsel to Fools, Sincerity to Flatterers, Roman Virtue to Betrayers of their Country, Piety to Atheists, Chastity to Sodomites, Truth to Informers.

(186)

In this episode, Gulliver the narrator seems to represent the authorial voice. As a neoclassicist, Swift shows respect for the ancient figures but is appalled at the distortion of history by modern historians, who he excoriates as "prostitute writers". Gulliver denounces modern history as a bunch of lies. His next destination is Luggnagg, where he looks forward to meeting Struldbruggs, the immortal creatures. He talks about the benefits of living eternally, for the immortals have the wisdom of the former ages. He assumes that they must be the wealthiest and wisest men of the kingdom. But soon he realises that though they live forever, they too grow old. When they turn eighty, they develop the follies and infirmities of other old men and become vain, talkative, and peevish. They are declared legally dead at the age of eighty and their heirs immediately seize their property. They are despised and hated by all sorts of people. Gulliver is forced to revise his opinion of eternal life and is utterly disillusioned with the

notion of immortality. He eventually wishes to return to his family and arrives in England via Japan and Holland. We shall now look at the various themes that the novel touches upon or deals with in section 3.5

3.5 THEMES AND ANALYSIS

Book III has two major themes: politics and the abuse of reason. These two ideas are strung together by the metaphor of science. It is a satire against the intellectual pride of man and on scientific pursuits in the academy of Lagadosubvert - the fundamental purpose of science and philosophy. Since the days of Socrates, philosophy has responded to a very concrete question – how to live happily?

3.5.1 Science for Science's Sake

This old Socratic question emphasises the applicability of theoretical knowledge to the problems faced by people. But it appears that the scientists and philosophers of Laputa and Lagado believe in science for science's sake. They have reduced science to a set of theoretical principles with no practical value. Consequently, after sixteen years of research, one scientist expects to get sunbeam out of cucumber, which is already abundant in nature. Swift's critique of the Royal Society and his contemporary scientists may help us understand the present condition of research in our country. Although in recent times, the emphasis is being laid on skill-based learning, the colonial education system that we have inherited has largely remained theory-based. The Laputans adorn their garments with the images of fiddles, flutes, guitars, and other musical instruments but when it comes to the application of their knowledge of music, they fail miserably. When they play on these instruments, the music lacks both rhythm and harmony. Instead, it produces a cacophony of deafening sound. Swift creates a dystopian universe in which unproductive and unfruitful works are encouraged and productive work is despised and looked down upon. He believes that human morality should take precedence over scientific pursuits.

The philosophers of the flying island are so lost in the abstract principles of mathematics, music, and astronomy that they neglect all their practical needs. They cannot even speak or hear without being reminded by their servants. These philosophers treat their wives gently but invariably neglect them. They continue to remain unconcerned even when women commit adultery and live with someone who beats them up regularly. Swift's description of the women of Laputa is an example of his misogyny:

This may perhaps pass with the Reader rather for a European or English story, than for one of a country so remote. But he may please to consider, that the caprices of womankind are not limited by any climate or nation; and that they are much more uniform than can be easily imagined. (152)

Both Pope and Swift are accused of misogyny, as they tend to generalise and stereotype women. Swift's mouthpiece Gulliver denounces the behavior of women without paying attention to their social isolation on an island dominated by male scientists and philosophers who cannot spare time for their spouses.

3.5.2 Laputa: An Absolutist State

The Flying Island is a metaphor for science and colonialism. It also stands for the concentration of power in the hands of a few who are disconnected from the masses and are driven by theory and experiments. The king never comes down and hears the petitions of the subjects. He merely flies over the town. It reflects England's treatment of Ireland. There are parallels between the brutal

repression of towns and villages by the Laputan king and the English colonial rule in Ireland and elsewhere. The king never finds a solution to the problems of the starving population but is keen to crush all sorts of rebellion without any delay. Similarly, the English barely did anything to provide food and employment to millions who perished during famines in Ireland, India, and other colonies. But they used coercive methods very swiftly to suppress even the most legitimate demands of its subjects. The Laputans represent the colonial state, absolutist state. They are indifferent to the demands of people. The empire has all the signs of an authoritarian regime, which demands the complete subservience of its people.

3.5.3 “Prostitute Writers”: Swift on Modern History

There are two more subthemes in Book III: one is the continuity between the classical and the neoclassical world and the other is Gulliver's fascination with immortality. Since neoclassical poets and satirists accepted the superiority of their classical masters and sought inspiration from them, Swift recreates the entire ancient Greco-Roman history. Eminent commanders, philosophers, warriors, and kings from ancient Rome are brought back from the dead. This episode helps Swift build a bridge between the ancient world and eighteenth-century England. It also gives him an entry point to challenge and counter the ways in which history and anecdotes are written. In his scathing attack on history and historians, he rejects the former as a bunch of concocted tales and the latter as “Prostitute Writers”. Swift makes a prophetic claim by countering the official version of historians. He anticipates the concern of postmodern and subaltern historians of the twentieth century who challenge the claims of objectivity in history. Postmodernism questions the line between fact and fiction in history. These days history is being read as literature and literature as history. What Swift may have done in jest is being pursued as a serious academic exercise nowadays. Our reading of the text may have let us understand that Swift was an interesting author and satirist. The next section will shed light on immortality.

3.5.4 Gulliver's Disillusionment with Immortality

A great author makes the readers interrogate conventional wisdom. Swift makes us question certain accepted notions regarding history writing, the Enlightenment, science, rationality, governance, politics, the binary between man and animal, and between reason and passion. The pursuit of immortality is one such belief. The desire to become immortal is as ancient as human civilisation. But immortality without youth and health can be a curse, as the myth of *Sibyl of Cumae* of ancient Greece and the story of *Ashwatthama* from the *Mahabharata* testify. It turned out to be a curse for Struldbruggs, who presents the “most mortifying sight” Gulliver has ever beheld and women are “more horrible than the men” (199). The perpetual existence of man without youth causes eternal suffering. As a result, towards the end of his journey in Book III, the naïve narrator of the book is eventually disenchanted with *athanasia*. *Gulliver's Travels* in some ways tells us the story of Gulliver's gradual disenchantment and transformation into a recluse, a process that culminates in Book IV.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Thus, this unit begins by discussing the important characters of *Gulliver's Travels*. Following this, we have briefly summarised and critically analysed Book I and Book II, where size becomes an indicator of virtue. We have seen that the first two books satirise human nature in general and the corrupt Whig administration in particular. Then, the unit has analysed Book III at length. After providing

a detailed summary of Gulliver's voyage to the flying island Laputa, we have critically examined the major themes of this section: the abuse of science and reason, colonialism, violence perpetrated by an absolutist state, the bridge between the classical world and the neoclassical world, writing history, and Gulliver's fascination and subsequent disillusionment with the notion of the perpetual existence of man. We have also studied how Swift's portrayal of a repressive regime and critique of colonialism turned out to be prophetic. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries various totalitarian regimes and the colonial state mercilessly suppressed all forms of dissent. His views on writing history have turned out to be equally prophetic, for subaltern historians and postmodernists have refused to acknowledge history as an objective account of important events. Similarly, the feminists have dissected history into "his" and "story" and argued that women have not been given due representation in male-dominated narratives! As a visionary, Swift questioned the methodology of history writing and pointed out the prejudices of historians more than two hundred and fifty years before this discourse was theorised in academic institutions.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Gulliver's Travels, Book III is a satire against the abuse of science and reason. Critically discuss.
2. The island of Laputa represents an absolutist state which brutally suppresses all sorts of dissent. Critically examine this statement with reference to Swift's views on colonialism.
3. Do you agree that immortality without youth can be an eternal curse? Give your views in the light of Gulliver's meeting with Struldbruggs.
4. Discuss Swift's views on history writing with reference to Book III of Gulliver's Travels. Does Swift as a visionary anticipate some of the preoccupations of modern-day historians who equate history with fiction?

UNIT 4 *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*: BOOK IV: SUMMARY, THEMES, AND ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV: Summary
- 4.3 Themes and Analysis
 - 4.3.1 Critique of Reason
 - 4.3.2 Extermination of the *Yahoos* and the *Jews*
 - 4.3.3 Gulliver – a *Yahoo* or a *Houyhnhnm*?
 - 4.3.4 The Homecoming and Swift on Colonialism
- 4.4 Colonialism and Bonds of Hospitality
- 4.5 “What’s in a name?”
- 4.6 Misogyny in *Gulliver's Travels*
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The present unit deals with the summary and major themes of *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV. First, it provides us with a detailed account of Gulliver's voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms. Since the Houyhnhnms are apparently the epitome of rationality and perfection, they are shocked to know that a difference of opinion has led to several catastrophic wars in England, where millions have perished. Having summarised the important episodes of Gulliver's voyage, the unit critically examines the main issues that the text raises, including Swift's critique of rationality, colonialism, Gulliver's homecoming and subsequent disillusionment with mankind in general, and George Orwell's reading of Book IV. It also focuses on Gulliver's transformation from a proud Englishman into someone who hates even an iota of pride. Although he shuns the company of humans who he considers Yahoos, Gulliver can still empathise with the inhabitants of the new islands he has left behind. He refuses to assist in their colonisation. The unit analyses Swift's anti-imperial stance at length. It also examines why Swift uses unfamiliar and strange names in *Gulliver's Travels*. In the last section, we briefly discuss Swift's misogyny, especially with reference to the description of female Yahoos.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The ideal world that Jonathan Swift supposedly creates in *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV is modelled on Plato's Republic and Sir Thomas Moore's Utopia. The horses, known as the Houyhnhnms, are the embodiment of reason and virtue. They seem to be so impeccable that Gulliver wants to follow in their footsteps. He wishes to talk, walk, eat, and behave like horses. But a closer examination of Swift's satire tells another story. The Augustan peace that the Houyhnhnms have achieved is an outcome of the brutal subjugation of the Yahoos. George Orwell finds signs

of totalitarianism, racism, and imperialism in their so called ideal world. He suggests that Yahoos occupy the same place in their community as the Jews in Nazi Germany, for the Houyhnhnms debate the question of the extermination of Yahoos. Despite these shortcomings, the Houyhnhnms are physically, morally, and intellectually superior to men. Swift questions the binary between man and animal by foregrounding the gap between what human beings ought to be and what they have become. He does not consider rationality to be the exclusive domain of humans. However, towards the end of the book, despite his hatred for mankind, Gulliver proves to be morally superior to both the Lilliputians and several other Englishmen. He refuses to assist the English government in colonising the inhabitants of the new islands that he has supposedly discovered. Since he does not violate the bonds of hospitality, his moral ascendancy is conspicuous. Colonialism does violate this sacrosanct bond between the guest and the host. Swift uses Gulliver as his mouthpiece to launch his anti-colonial tirade against the English. Books III and IV, therefore, should be interpreted together as Swift's incisive critique of English colonialism in Ireland and his indictment of human species, for the entire human race is denounced as Yahoos. Man is the object of satire in *Gulliver's Travels*. Let us summarise Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* next.

4.2 *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*, BOOK IV: SUMMARY

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV, Swift continues with the strategy of using both fiction and facts. The map and names of the new places that Gulliver supposedly discovers are fictional whereas names of English cities, days, and dates mentioned are real. Readers, like Gulliver, oscillate between the world of fantasy and that of the reality of the British landscape. After spending five months at home with his wife and children, Gulliver sets out on his final journey on September 7, 1710. He accepts the position of captain of the *Adventure*, a merchant ship. When several members of his crew die on the voyage, he is forced to replace them with new sailors. Unfortunately, they turn out to be pirates who soon seize the ship and lock Gulliver in his cabin. After many weeks of imprisonment on the ship, they leave him on an unknown island where Gulliver counters the Yahoos.

They are the degraded version of men, with thick hair and strong claws on their hands and feet. Gulliver remarks that "upon the whole, I never beheld in all my Travels so disagreeable an Animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy" (209). His heart is filled with contempt and aversion at the sight of these ugly beasts. When a Yahoo approaches Gulliver out of curiosity or mischief, he hits him with the flat side of his sword. He does not want to take the risk of stabbing a Yahoo and provoking the other members of his community. They attack Gulliver by discharging their excrements on him. Meanwhile, when a horse approaches them, they all run away. This horse inspects Gulliver with curiosity and is soon joined by another horse. They seem to whinny a conversation and repeat the words – Yahoo and Houyhnhnm. He soon realises that these horses, called Houyhnhnms, are rational creatures and they can communicate. Gulliver finds their behaviour so orderly and judicious that he concludes that they must be magicians. He follows one of the horses, a grey steed, to its dwelling, made of timber with a straw roof where he meets several other Houyhnhnms. He observes many Yahoos eating roots and the flesh of cow, dogs, and asses. They were owned by the horses and tied to beams. The master horse instructs one of his servants to bring the beast and Gulliver together to compare their faces. As a result, they repeat the word Yahoo, for Gulliver is a Yahoo for them. Dumbfounded, Gulliver remarks, "My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed,

in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure; the Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide" (214).

Bewildered, he tries to convince the Houyhnhnms that he is not a Yahoo. Both Gulliver and the horses are equally astounded. The former is surprised to see rationality and civility in horses whereas the Houyhnhnms are amazed to discover "teachableness", cleanliness, and the marks of a rational creature in a Yahoo.

Gulliver quickly learns their language, which he finds strange, but somewhat similar to High Dutch. He soon gets to know that the inhabitants of the island have not the least idea of books or literature so he shows them how to write. They explain to him that though Houyhnhnm means horse, it is derived from a word meaning "perfection of nature". They have no word for lying in their utopian society. They call it "the thing which is not". When Gulliver recounts the tales of Europe to them, they wonder whether he is telling them "the thing which is not". Similarly, in their ideal world, words like power, government, war, law, and punishment do not exist. They find it unbelievable that there could be a country beyond the sea where Yahoos could sail a ship. When Gulliver explains the reversal of role of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos in his country, the master horse is shocked. Though he calls Gulliver a perfect yahoo, he is filled with indignation when he learns about the atrocities committed against his race by the "Yahoos" in England.

While referring to the political manoeuvring in England, Gulliver describes the prolonged wars fought for religious and political reasons. At the behest of his master, he calculates that about a million Yahoos were killed in these wars. The horse stands aghast at this disclosure and wants to know what causes war between countries. Gulliver remarks that ambition of princes and difference of opinion are the major reasons behind war. Sometimes, corrupt ministers start wars to divert the attention of subjects from their evil administration. No war is as fierce and gory as the ones fought over difference of opinion. Gulliver continues: "Difference in Opinions hath cost many Millions of Lives: For instance, whether Flesh be Bread, or Bread be Flesh: Whether the Juice of a certain Berry be Blood or Wine: Whether Whistling be a Vice or a Virtue (229)." In Book I of *Gulliver's Travels*, disagreement over a minor issue leads to a war between the Lilliputs and the Blefuscu. These two empires fight over whether the egg should be broken upon the larger end or the smaller end. Such humorous treatment of the disproportion between the trivial reasons that cause war and its catastrophic outcome must have reminded Swift's contemporary readers of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1715). In the second line of his mock-heroic poem, Pope says, "What mighty contests rise from trivial things". Both Pope and Swift use the mock-heroic form in their poem and satire respectively to poke fun at war. It is a truth universally acknowledged and tested that "mighty contests" have invariably been caused by "trivial things". Swift and Pope, then, provide a moral commentary on the human nature and nature of war. Readers are invited to draw a parallel between England and the alternative worlds that Gulliver discovers. One may also observe similarities between Book I and this episode of Book IV, as they both are satirical representations of English Civil War fought, to some extent, over a difference of opinion.

Unlike England and Lilliput, on the island of Houyhnhnms, the word opinion is not known. It becomes an upheaval task, therefore, for Gulliver to explain to them the meaning of words such as controversy, dispute, and opinion or how a point becomes disputable. They never have had difference of opinion. Friendship and benevolence are the two principal virtues among them. The only debate that ever

happens in their country is about whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the face of the earth. The Yahoos often stealthily suck the teats of the Houyhnhnm cows, kill and devour their cats, and trample their oats and grass. As an outcome, they are either hunted or captured as slaves.

Having spent three years with the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver gradually comes to believe that Europeans are Yahoos. He eventually realises that “I could no longer deny that I was a real Yahoo, in every limb and feature” (249). When the king of Brobdingnag denounces the Europeans as “Little Odious Vermin”, Gulliver is upset. He tries to conceal his resentment while his “noble and most beloved Country was so injuriously treated”. But Book IV emphasises his transformation from a proud Englishman into a disillusioned man who accepts that his countrymen are as depraved, uncivilised, and beastly as Yahoos. As an outcome, Gulliver does not show any resentment when the horses call him a Yahoo. Rather, he gradually begins to share the worldview of the Houyhnhnms.

The acceptance of Europeans as Yahoos is an outcome of Gulliver’s admiration for Houyhnhnms, who have no concept of evil. They are decent and civil to each other. They always help those in need and love all members of their race equally. Since they have several stoic traits, they have no place for courtship, love, and joy in their thoughts also. The young ones are taught the values of moderation, exercise, and cleanliness. Gulliver is so enchanted with them that he attempts to adopt their language and mannerism. He wants to stay with them forever but his enthusiasm is short-lived.

One day, the Houyhnhnms decide that a Yahoo, however intelligent and rational, should not live with them. He is given two months to build a canoe and leave. Gulliver does not want to return to Europe and decides to live on an island. He would rather live with the barbarians on some remotely located place than the English Yahoos. He finds an island where he is struck by an arrow shot by the natives. Consequently, he escapes. Despite his injury, he is reluctant to go back to his country which he admired and loved at the outset of this journey. He is eventually rescued by a ship where the captain Don Pedro de Mendez treats him hospitably but Gulliver considers him a Yahoo and wants to escape. He is forced to travel back to England. When he meets his wife and children, he is filled with disgust and contempt for them. He cannot stomach the thought of living among the Yahoos. He whinnies like a horse and lives in the stable among two young horses. Human pride is so offensive to him that he asserts that those who harbour this vice should never appear before him. Let us look at the themes dealt with in Book IV next.

4.3 THEMES AND ANALYSIS

The central theme of Book IV is Swift’s trenchant critique of association of rationality with humans which was at the heart of the Enlightenment. The absolute rationality of the Houyhnhnms is modelled on **Plato’s *Republic*** and **Moore’s *Utopia***.

4.3.1 Critique of Reason

Swift challenges the traditional idea that humans, unlike other beasts, are rational animals. Book IV is based upon the principle of reversal of the classical definitions of animal and human in the age of the Enlightenment. The expression rational horse may have appeared to be an oxymoron to some in the eighteenth-century but Swift foregrounds the fact that pure rationality is not within human reach. It may also be a way of subverting the ideas about progress that was spread by the

Enlightenment, by showing human beings losing the “divine faculty” of reason and regressing to a Hobbesian state of nature. (Bloom, 147). Hobbes's assertion in *Leviathan* (1651) that human life is “nasty, short, and brutish” may have inspired Swift to create a world infested with the Yahoos. Unlike the Yahoos, the Houyhnhnms are the embodiment of reason, virtue, civility, peace, moderation, and cleanliness. They are not driven by instincts. But are the Houyhnhnms as ideal and rational as they come across in the text at first glance? Could it be that the Augustan peace they have achieved is an outcome of the brutal subjugation and slavery of the Yahoos? George Orwell sees the extermination of the Yahoos similar to the extermination of the Jews in the Holocaust. Let's look at that next.

4.3.2 Extermination of the *Yahoos* and the *Jews*

Orwell and other modern readers of Swift often associate Houyhnhnm land with totalitarianism, racism, and imperialism. Upon closer examination of the text, one finds that their society is divided along class lines into the gentry and the servants. George Orwell remarks, “The Houyhnhnms are organised upon a sort of caste system which is racial in character, the horses which do the menial work being of different colours from their masters and not interbreeding with them” (215). They manage, indeed, without an aristocracy or monarch. However, they have a “Representative Council of the Whole Nation”, where the only debate that ever happened was whether the Yahoos should be exterminated. The word extermination must have rung a bell in the mind of Orwell and other readers of Swift in the 1940s. A prescient reader of Swift, Orwell, argues that the Yahoos occupy rather the same place in their community as the Jews in Nazi Germany. However, this suggestion of Orwell has been rejected by **Claude Rawson** in his insightful *Introduction to Oxford World's Classics on Gulliver's Travels*. While referring to the debate on extermination, Rawson writes:

This language has led some interpreters to argue that Swift portrayed the Houyhnhnms as genocidal murderers, thus inviting us to read the book as disapproving of them. To this one might answer first that the Yahoos are beasts in the eyes of the Houyhnhnms, so that exterminating them would be no different from exterminating some farmyard pest in the human world. That the Yahoos nevertheless seem human to the reader adds a black humorous touch, no doubt calculated to offend us, but without erasing the main point that in the story they are an alien and unhygienic species. Secondly, the extermination is never carried out. (xxxix)

Rawson refuses to attribute Nazi characteristics to the Houyhnhnms. However, he agrees that Yahoo labour is useful to the Houyhnhnm economy and it prefigures the Nazi example with uncanny precision. As the brutal suppression of thousands of slaves during the heyday of the Roman Empire became the foundation of Pax Romana, that is, Roman Peace, the ruthless subjugation of the Yahoos becomes the basis of the Augustan peace of the Houyhnhnms. One may extend this analogy a little further and suggest that colonialism and the violent suppression of the colonised were at the heart of the peace and prosperity of England.

4.3.3 Gulliver – a *Yahoo* or a *Houyhnhnm*?

Readers of Swift are often tempted to look at Houyhnhnms as Swift's ideal for man. The Yahoos, on the other hand, can be read as the representation of what men have become. However, neither the Yahoos nor the Houyhnhnms can portray human beings. Swift isolates the two elements that are combined in the duality of man. The Yahoos are purely sensual whereas the Houyhnhnms are purely rational. In the Great Chain of Being, man shares both the intelligence of angels as well as

the sensuality of animals. As a satirist, Swift foregrounds the gap between how men ought to be and what they have become. Human beings, writes Eagleton, “are not just a third term between Yahoo and Houyhnhnm”. They are closer to the Yahoos but ‘Yahoo’ is also a “Houyhnhnm-like way of seeing humans” (38). Initially, when Gulliver encounters the Yahoos, he develops antipathy towards them. But for the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver is a Yahoo precisely because he is a man. Thus, the object of satire in Swift is not Gulliver alone, not even Englishmen, but the entire human race. Swift, therefore, surpasses his classical predecessor Juvenal for whom the object of satire was Rome. In the Anglo-Irish author, we see a strong indictment of the human species.

Towards the end of the story Gulliver becomes delusional and ends up believing that humans are Yahoos and that he himself is a Houyhnhnm. Gulliver’s response can be studied in two ways: his transformation into a misanthrope and an act of self-discovery. He discovers his individual nature as well as human nature. As an outcome, his inflated pride is punctured. He does not believe in the superiority of Europeans any more. The English were so proud of their identity in the eighteenth-century that somebody commented on a lighter note that God must be an Englishman. Human nature became a subject of enquiry from the sixteenth century onwards when a shift took place from a theocentric universe to an anthropocentric universe. Alexander Pope wrote in his “*An Essay on Man* (1733) that the proper study of mankind is man. Human nature has been the subject of scrutiny since antiquity. In ancient Greece, the Delphic maxim “know thyself” was the guiding principle for philosophers. Similarly, in ancient India the Upanishads emphasised *atmanam vidhi* – know thyself! Let us now look at Swift’s take on colonialism next.

4.3.4 The Homecoming and Swift on Colonialism

The renaissance and neoclassical poets revisited this subject with a renewed vigour. Self-discovery requires certain level of detachment and self-reflectivity. When Gulliver embarks on his first voyage, he is so obsessed with England that he cannot reflect on depravity of the English. But upon discovering the degraded essence of man towards the end of Book IV, he loses the equilibrium of mind, for he invariably travels in extremes. Surprisingly, he finds human beings, including himself, worse than a Yahoo, “When I happened to behold the Reflection of my own Form in a Lake or Fountain, I turned away my Face in Horror and detestation of myself; and could better endure the Sight of a common Yahoo, than of my own Person” (260). It is an anti-Narcissistic moment for Gulliver. He has an impressionable mind and therefore he begins to look at himself from the perspective of the Houyhnhnms. He continues to share this perspective upon his return to England, where the sight of his wife and children fills him with hatred, disgust, and contempt. The overseas adventures bring him neither military conquest nor riches but terror, vulnerability, repeated captivities, and above all, alteration of self. However, despite all his failures, Gulliver retains or rather regains humanity. To denounce the entire species of human beings as Yahoos and to retain humanity at the same time may sound a contradictory proposition but they are not. This can be illustrated with a close examination of Gulliver’s anti-imperialist outbursts towards the end of the book. As a loyal subject, he has to report the discovery of the new lands to the British government but he is opposed to the idea of destroying these islands:

The Lilliputians I think, are hardly worth the Charge of a Fleet and Army to reduce them; and I question whether it might be prudent or safe to attempt

the Brobdingnagians: Or, whether an English Army would be much at their Ease with the Flying Island over their Heads. The Houyhnhnms, indeed, appear not to be so well prepared for war, a Science to which they are perfect Strangers, and especially against missive Weapons. However, supposing myself to be a Minister of State, I could never give my Advice for invading them. Their Prudence, Unanimity, Unacquaintedness with Fear, and their Love of their Country would amply supply all Defects in the military Art. Imagine twenty Thousand of them breaking into the Midst of an European Army, confounding the Ranks, overturning the Carriages, battering the Warriors Faces into Mummy, by terrible Yerks from their hinder Hoofs.

(274)

Gulliver claims to be against war and colonisation. He does not want the inhabitants of the new islands to be conquered, enslaved, and murdered by England. He appears to speak on behalf of Swift, for as a Tory sympathiser, Swift rejected war. Whenever a war broke out in England, the landed aristocracy who supported the Tories had to bear the burden of increased taxes. On the other hand, the rising business class who sympathised with the Whigs, made profit. Edward Said was especially impressed by Swift's refusal to glamorise war as a Tory. Thus, the experiences that Gulliver had during these voyages may not have brought him wealth or laurels, like Robinson Crusoe, but he becomes a better human being. His biggest achievement is that he can retain humanity even by dissociating himself from humans. Let us try and understand the notion of hospitality per se and as it exists in the text in the next section.

4.4 COLONIALISM AND BONDS OF HOSPITALITY

Despite all his faults and abhorrence of human beings, Gulliver's ability to empathise with the inhabitants of the new islands he claims to have discovered, makes him a hero. No matter what, he wants to protect them from British colonialism. Gulliver, in the end, turns out to be morally superior to both Englishmen and several other characters he encounters during his voyages. His moral pre eminence stems from his ability to respect the bond between a host and a guest. Lilliputians do not respect the bonds of hospitality. They conspire against their guest who protects them from the neighbouring enemy and, therefore, they are morally depraved. In Book I, while they were walking all over Gulliver's body, he was tempted to seize forty-fifty of them and dash them against the ground. But Gulliver resists this temptation, as he feels bound by the "Laws of Hospitality to a People who had treated me with so much Expend and Magnificence" (20). Unlike the Lilliputians, the Houyhnhnms treat their guests hospitably. They value friendship and benevolence. They treat a stranger from the remotest part of the island as affectionately as they will treat their nearest neighbour. Thus, both Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms, present us with the model of a good guest and a good host respectively. Gulliver continues playing the role of a good host and does not betray anyone after he leaves the islands. The safety of the inhabitants of these islands is his prime concern. He breaks the law of his country but not the trust of his friends. Hospitality was a recurring trope both in the classical texts of Greco-Roman culture and in Gulliver's Travels. In the Homeric world, like the world of ancient India, it was a sacred bond. Both the Iliad and the Odyssey are full of references to the warm welcome extended to guests, including strangers by the host. The violation of this bond was a taboo. Paris desecrated it and as a result the entire city of Troy had to pay the price.

4.5 “WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

Readers of *Gulliver's Travels* may often wonder why Swift uses the name Houyhnhnm for horses. Or what could be the possible reason behind using such bizarre tongue twisters like Brobdingnagians, Struldbruggs, Luggnaggians, and Laputans. Why was he trying to flummox his readers with such names? There could be two possible answers to this question. One, Swift wanted to validate and authenticate his work of fiction as a travelogue. Since Gulliver claims to discover new islands where no other European has ever been to, it was important to invent names which sounded unfamiliar to English readers. Had Swift used European names, readers would have immediately rejected Gulliver's proposition that he went to hitherto unexplored territories. Swift wanted the book to be the talk of the town and the unfamiliar names added a new dimension to its popularity.

And the other reason which is somewhat related to the first is the defamiliarising impact these names must have had on the readers. Swift recasts familiar names, especially horses, in a way that readers find them new. Literature can present familiar things in an unfamiliar way. The Russian formalist, *Viktor Shklovsky*, wrote in 1917, that literature has the ability to make us see the world anew – to make that which has become familiar to us, because we have been exposed to it, strange again. Russian formalists called this function of literature defamiliarisation (Ctd. in Bertons, 33). Though the name Houyhnhnm may have been taken from the whinnying sound that horses make it does add a freshness to the story. Swift and Laurence Sterne both anticipated some of the concerns of Russian formalists and used strange names in their fiction to present the banal world to readers in a novel way. Samuel Johnson was critical of both owing to their innovations some of which he found odd. He calls *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV, a source of disgust. There are several episodes in Swift's satire, which may evoke nausea and disgust. One such incident is the depiction of female Yahoo pouncing on Gulliver for sex. Was Swift a misogynist? That's what we shall look at next.

4.6 MISOGYNY IN *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*

Samuel Johnson had ambivalent feelings towards Swift. On the one hand, in his book *Lives of the English Poets*, he calls *Gulliver's Travels*, “a production so new and strange, that it filled the reader with a mingled emotion of merriment and amazement”. As a younger contemporary of Swift, Johnson had witnessed its popularity. He knew that the book was received with such avidity that the price of the first edition was raised before the second was brought out. It was equally enjoyed by the “high and the low, the learned and illiterate”. No rules of judgement and criticism were applied to a book written in open defiance of truth and regularity, Johnson writes further. But he was particularly displeased with Books III and IV. Book III, which deals with Gulliver's voyage to the flying island, and those parts became a source of “least pleasure” for Johnson whereas Book IV became a “source of disgust” (334).

The description of the Yahoos, especially the female ones, has upset many readers. When an eleven-year-old female Yahoo, inflamed by desire, jumps into the water where Gulliver is bathing naked, and he is frightened. A horse, eventually, comes to his rescue. Swift describes the female body not as an object of beauty and desire but disgust both in Book II and Book IV. A female Yahoo has the most offensive smell, Gulliver observes. The sores and cancers on the breasts of Brobdingnagian women disturb him. He finds their breasts monstrous and horrifying. The sight of the naked body of sixty feet women does not bring

any other emotion than “those of horror and disgust”. Since beauty is subjected to size here, one may conclude that European women must have appeared the same to the Lilliputians. Critics often tend to read the denunciation of the female body as an example of Swift’s misogyny, which was common in the eighteenth-century. “Most Women have no Characters at all”, wrote Alexander Pope in his poem “*To a Lady: Of the Characters of Women*” (1743). Despite the accusations of misogyny and evoking disgust, *Gulliver’s Travels* has continued to remain as popular as it was in Johnson’s times. The universal appeal of Swift’s satire stems from the fact that readers all over the world tend to empathise with it. Swift will continue to mesmerise novelists, scientists, postcolonial thinkers, animal rights activists, children, and the survivors of the Holocaust and the totalitarian regimes in the upcoming years.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit begins with a critical summary of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Book IV. We examined the important episodes and themes from the text. The unit has mainly emphasised Swift’s critique of rationality, his reversal of the classical definitions of animal and human, and above all, his anti-imperial stance. It has examined Orwell’s reading of the relation between the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms. It also studies the reasons behind the use of unfamiliar and bizarre names in *Gulliver’s Travels*. We have analysed the trope of hospitality at length and showed that those who respect this bond are morally superior to the ones who violate it. Towards the concluding section, the unit has discussed Swift’s misogyny briefly. We have also studied Johnson’s claim that Book IV evokes disgust. Though the four voyages that *Gulliver* undertakes seems disconnected from one another, there are thematic continuities among them. For instance, colonialism, hospitality, war, governance, and misogyny are recurring tropes throughout the book. These subjects will always remain of contemporary relevance and modern readers will find in Swift a solution to their problems. Swift continues to entertain and vex us.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical summary of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Book IV.
2. Swift questions the notion of rationality as the exclusive domain of man. Critically examine with reference to *Gulliver’s* voyage to the Houyhnhnms?
3. Do you agree that the Houyhnhnms are an embodiment of perfection and rationality? Examine with reference to their relationship with the Yahoos?
4. Critically analyse Book IV as the critique of English colonialism.

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Block**3****WILLIAM CONGREVE: *THE WAY OF
THE WORLD***

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

William Congreve has been celebrated for popularising the comedy of manners and his most famous comedy - *The Way of the World*, continues to be an integral component of the English theatrical repertoire. In order to critically understand the significance of its popularity, we have to locate the play concretely in its socio-historical and political context.

The four units of this Block obviously do not constitute an exhaustive representation of all the critical interpretations of *The Way of the World*. But we have endeavoured to include discussions on the crucial aspects of the play so as to familiarise you with the playwright, the historical setting and the ideological politics of the play. We have also incorporated explanations of difficult words and concepts and complemented the analysis of the play with relevant question-answer exercises so that you can simultaneously check your understanding of the text. Please read the text *The Way of the World* by William Congreve

The Units are as follows:

Unit 1: William Congreve: Life and Works

Unit 2: *The Way of the World*: A Summary

Unit 3: *The Way of the World*: Themes

Unit 4: *The Way of the World*: Symbols, Allegories and Motifs

UNIT 1 WILLIAM CONGREVE: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details of William Congreve
- 1.3 Politico-historical Circumstances of 17th and 18th century England
- 1.4 William Congreve, His Works and the Restoration Play
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.7 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will endeavour to familiarise you with **William Congreve**, who has been celebrated by posterity as a member of the triumvirate of Restoration Comic dramatists along with **George Etherege** and **William Wycherley**.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will try and trace the trajectories of the socio-cultural and political developments that occurred in the 17th century in England and eventually culminated in the reinstatement of Charles II as the monarch and ushered in what is popularly called the "Restoration Period." Navigating through these societal and political developments will facilitate a much more informed understanding of Congreve's literary oeuvre and will make it possible to comprehend his plays, primarily, *The Way of the World* (premiered in 1700), as a deeply self-conscious and historically aware text that participates in some of the most interesting social debates of its time.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF WILLIAM CONGREVE

Congreve was born in Bardsey, Yorkshire on 24 January, 1670. His father was the second son of a Staffordshire squire who encountered numerous financial difficulties owing to his affiliation with the Tories during the civil war. Congreve's father was given a commission as a lieutenant in the Irish army and consequently, the family moved to Kilkenny where Congreve's father joined the Duke of Ormond's regiment. This facilitated Congreve's admission in Kilkenny College that, not only imparted him good overall education but also laid the foundation of his interest in classical languages and literature which would later fuel his reputation as one of the wittiest men in his contemporary literary circles. He later joined Trinity College in Dublin in 1686 but the college started encountering many difficulties owing to King James II's accession to the throne. As a consequence of political difficulties, the college shut down for some time and Congreve's father got him enrolled as a law student in the Middle Temple. Legal studies did not really excite him. Literary pursuits caught his fancy and he started frequenting the circle of wits and writers who congregated at Will's Coffee House where he also befriended the well-established writer - John Dryden and gradually carved

a niche for himself in the fashionable literary circuits of his time (Thomas 2-3). Let us now look at the politico- historical circumstances of the 17th and the 18th century England next.

1.3 POLITICO - HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND

Congreve lived through the transitional times of the 17th century when England was divided into the ideological camps of the Whigs and the Tories. He himself supported the Whigs and their vision of an ordered, stable society and his plays often represent the political clashes of their time. The main issue of contention revolved around matters of governance and the nature of rights and privileges of the monarchs and the people. Charles I increasingly favoured a vision of divinely sanctioned monarchy that earned him a lot of criticism from the people who supported a constitutional parliamentary form of monarchy. Even though the Parliament of England did not enjoy a lot of power as far as governance was concerned, but over the centuries it had become an important political force which could not be simply brushed aside by the monarch, especially because of its ability to raise taxes. Charles I did not call on the Parliament for 11 years. To manage his finances, he tried to make peace with England's traditional rivals - France and Spain. To raise money, he imposed many fines and taxes. His marriage to the Catholic French Priestess also raised eyebrows, (again, we need to recall what we studied in Block I, Unit I of BEGC 107 when we were talking about 17th century England). Moreover, he introduced many ceremonial forms of worship into the Church and incurred the wrath of the Protestants who accused him of favouring Catholicism. Indignation against his policies kept on increasing and translated into a series of armed conflicts and political manoeuvring between the Parliamentarians (Round heads) and the Royalists (Cavaliers). The war ended with the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, the exile of his son, Charles II, the establishment of the Protectorate under the rule of Oliver Cromwell from 1653 to 1658 and then his son, Richard Cromwell from 1658 to 1659. Richard Cromwell did not have the confidence of the army and soon a faction of the army removed him and England plunged into a political chaos. In 1660, Charles II returned from the exile - this was the beginning of the Restoration Period.

The Restoration Period espoused an ideology of libertinism which was primarily a 17th century version of classical Epicurean hedonism. For the libertines, the senses were the most important sources of cognition and emphasised the material world over the illusory promises of ideals. They celebrated free indulgence of appetites, and a new kind of self-fashioning assumed great prominence in 17th century England. What used to be condemned by conventional morality - adultery, gambling, instant gratification of senses, became flamboyant pursuits. Since Charles II himself was the biggest endorser of this ideology, it also went on to imply a certain loyalty to the monarch and therefore, monarchy. Libertinism became an upper-class ideology and in the context of the Restoration, it also became an ideological tool to critique Puritanism that was dominantly associated with the Cromwellian reign (Staves 20-21). After the Restoration of Charles II, a wave of sympathy for the Royalists seized the politico-social landscape of England and this was very evident in the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, Dryden and *Aphra Behn*. However, it would be a very simplistic analysis to view these plays as mere royalist propaganda as they also often foregrounded the contradictions of society. Even the royalist had their own share of differences especially over the ideas propounded by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Thomas 28). In his most

influential piece of writing, *Leviathan* (1651), he propounded that human beings in their natural state, stripped from their civilised veneer, are only motivated by the gratification of appetites and are constantly engaged in a ceaseless struggle for power and supremacy. His ideas stirred quite a controversy as they were diametrically opposed to the accepted Christian notion of man as being created after the image of God. His amoral conceptualisation of human beings necessitated that the only manner to achieve some modicum of amicability and civility was to invest power in a sovereign entity. The mutually agreed upon sovereign body being the only way to create a stable and ordered society.

However, all was not hunky dory with Charles' monarchy either. His open endorsement of promiscuity and a lavish lifestyle made many of his own supporters uncomfortable. His marriage to Catherine of Braganza was unpopular and they were childless. The 1665 Plague and the Great Fire of London (1666) were also seen as divine rebukes for Royal sins. So though, initially hailed as the beginning of political stability, the Restoration period was again characterised by dynastic uncertainty (Hughes 129-133).

Thus, the debates about efficient governance continued even after Charles II was restored to monarchy in 1660. As a consequence, the political thinkers and philosophers tried to provide some kind of foundation to grapple with the ideological battles. A major Whig political thinker who left a deep impression on the age was John Locke. Locke argued that the relationship between the governed and the government should be premised upon a contract reached through mutual consent. Obviously, given the larger political repercussions of Hobbes' ideas, royalists were opposed to the Hobbesian model of governance. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Hobbes' arguments on absolute authority did not enjoy much fervour especially in the wake of the recent political debacles. King James II resorted to absolute authority to defend and propagate his rule as well as the Catholic faith and the Parliament came to be suspended and the rule of statute law was revoked. The birth of a son to King James further strengthened the fears of a Catholic regime. Amidst all this politico-social chaos, William of Orange, the husband of King James' Protestant daughter, Mary, was invited by many English noblemen to protect the hereditary rights of his wife. William's political overtures proved popular and a lot of people supported his cause leading King James to flee the country without even fighting a battle. On reaching England, William was invited by the Whigs and the Tories to preside over a Convention Parliament on 22nd January 1689 which concluded that the arbitrary exercise of power by King James had resulted in a breaching of the contract between the King and the people and thus, paved the way for William and Mary to jointly assume charge of the throne but their powers would be checked by the Bill of Rights. A number of High Tories continued to vehemently oppose the disposing off of King James, but by and large the Glorious Revolution brought with it a promise of stability (Thomas 31- 33).

This newly reinstated political arrangement was provided a philosophical grounding in John Locke's anonymously published work - *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) where he argued that the notion of government is primarily driven by the consent of the people who choose to enter a contract with those in positions of authority. The people vow to abide by most of the decisions of government in lieu of protection of their freedom and property. Locke's repeated emphasis on property and money tied his interests with those of the emergent merchant-class who eventually went on to become significant stakeholders in these contractual obligations. The Lockean notion of contract theory became a very

important political concept and also exercised a lot of influence on Congreve's thought-processes. Like Locke, Congreve admitted that the world is not ideal and human beings are not perfect but an effective and practical social arrangement can be worked out by making contracts and thereby, enabling a habitable social existence. He attacked the typical Hobbesian concept of characters driven only by the satiation of coarse appetites but foregrounds how property and money can be deployed as a means to social and mental well-being and entering into mutually agreed upon contracts constitute the basis of a civilised society (Thomas 33).

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Give the biographical details of Congreve's life.
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- 2) What do you think were the most intense political debates of 17th century England?
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- 3) Who were the two philosophers who influenced the socio-cultural and political conceptualisations in the 17th century?
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- 4) What do you understand by the Restoration Period? Give some of its characteristics.
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1.4 WILLIAM CONGREVE, HIS WORKS AND THE RESTORATION PLAY

We shall now begin by examining William Congreve's life and works in this section. Though Congreve's literary output takes shape during the rule of William and Mary but his plays are considered to belong to the repertoire of the Restoration literature because the theatres for which he wrote were the ones established during the 1660s. For instance, Wren's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Duke's playhouse at Dorset Garden were still popular places for stage productions. Since the stage conventions were also dictated by theatrical structures, Congreve's plays are somewhat rooted in Restoration stage conventions - be it the obvious

divide between a forestage and scenic stage or the painted shutters signifying the interiors of the bedrooms (Thomas 39). However, as English society was located on the cusp of a change, the demographic of the audience underwent a shift which triggered a demand for a new kind of theatrical experience. The erstwhile court-based theatre of the Restoration that catered to the leisure of the upper echelons of society was now getting commercialised and grappling to accommodate a flurry of palettes especially those with a craving for sentimental comedies and farces.

The Restoration comedy had emerged as a recognisable genre in the 1660s. The comic legacies of Jacobean and Caroline drama gave it a robust foundation while the French influence, specifically that of Moliere, gave it the finesse. Sir George Etherege exercised a significant role in consolidating Restoration comedy as a genre with his first two plays - *Love in a Tub* (1664) and *She wou'd if she cou'd* (1668). In both these plays, the English and French comic tropes were carefully woven in the fabric of the narrative. John Dryden's *The Wild Gallant* (1663) was chiefly responsible for creating the quintessential rakish protagonist that went on to become synonymous with Restoration comedies. Another striking feature of Restoration drama during its heyday was the disparity it foregrounded between the expected polished behaviour and the Dionysian excesses to which the characters would eventually succumb (Thomas 16-17).

In 1691, Congreve published a short novel called *Incognita*. By 1695, Congreve had consolidated his reputation as a poet and a dramatist to be reckoned with, especially with the successful reception of *Love for Love* and the publication of the pastoral poem "The Mourning Muse of Alexis" which bemoaned the loss of Queen Mary. This period in his life was also coterminous with the political rewards that were bestowed upon him for his loyalty to the Whig bandwagon. Congreve was made a Commissioner for Hackney Coaches and the pro-Whig ministers of William III expected him to deploy his literary talent for the advancement of their cause. Congreve reciprocated by publishing a Pindarique Ode humbly offer'd to the King, on taking Namure, shortly afterwards which heaped lavish praise on William III. Congreve was not a very simplistic Whig loyalist, determined to write comedies characterised by emotional excesses that would eventually go on to populate the 18th century stage. His ideological attitude towards both life and playwriting strove to strike a balance between the fashionable nonchalance that was typical of Restoration literature and the emotional ardour of the 18th century. Owing to the civil war, the Restoration Period witnessed a decline in harping about sentimentality and instead stressed more on the form of the literary piece. Hobbes' "Answer to Davenant's Preface to Gondibert" had already stated the primacy of form in the aesthetic theory which according to him provided the structure whereas, the imagination only served an ornamental purpose. This means that the pattern is supreme. Congreve also followed this affiliation to judgement and reason and treated them as prerequisites to the creative process. The plotlines of his plays are carefully refined and regulated as the characters indulge in their intrigues and wordplays. While there are certainly echoes of earlier Restoration comedies but there is a drastic change in tenor. His heroes are not completely under the sway of their appetites but are refined people who have mastered the task of transmuting their cravings into sophisticated pursuits. Congreve tries to smooth the rough edges of the earlier comedies and delves deeper into understanding the intricacies of human behaviour. As Thomas states, a kind of restraint that his protagonists exhibit in their social negotiations go on to become the characteristic feature of his late comedies (Thomas 4-17).

Congreve's literary oeuvre can be studied as an attempt to transmute the inevitabilities of life into a pleasing pattern with a semblance of harmony and coherence. The Company at Lincoln's Inn Fields in London premiered William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. The play did not receive immediate success but posterity has bestowed the honour on Congreve by making him a member of the triumvirate of Restoration Comic dramatists with Sir George Etherege and William Wycherley. The socio-cultural climate after the Glorious Revolution was not favourably predisposed to the reception of plays as William and Mary did not provide the royal patronage that was granted under the regime of Charles II. Reformists groups like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge further maligned the image of the theatres. *Robert D Hume* argues that all these incidents point to the "cultural marginalisation" of theatre (508). The hindrances faced by Congreve in appealing to the preferences of the audience are mirrored in the prologue to *The Way of the World*.

Congreve's plays foreground the ethos of the changing socio-cultural and political landscape of England in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (1688) in which the monarchy of James II was supplanted by William III of Orange. The post-revolution England underwent phenomenal transitions and encountered new challenges. In the wake of the establishment of constitutional monarchy, the *Bill of Rights* granted a sense of harmony and structure to English society. The merchant classes were emerging as a significant social group with rising clout. Since they negotiated regularly with the material realities of money and property, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary benefits started assuming cultural prominence. Aggrandisement of personal wealth accompanied by a careful investment in practical considerations dictated their thought process. The comedies of Congreve encapsulate these concerns about money and tangible assets. The Glorious Revolution as a whole celebrated the victory of middle-class value systems. As a consequence, Societies for the Reformation of Manners were established in 1690s and women often actively participated in them. Women also led campaigns to cleanse the playhouses of the lewdness and profanity that had apparently become staple ingredients of Restoration theatre. After the High Tory Churchman, Jeremy Collier, published his scathing indictment of the Restoration stage, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, a lot of actors were prosecuted for their supposed obscene performances. Given his Jacobite inclination, Collier was a very peculiar champion for the puritanical tastes that were becoming fashionable under William III. But he desperately needed some avenue to resuscitate his image given his very obvious opposition to William III. His *Short View* struck the right chord with the masses and with William III for upholding the puritan middle-class sensibilities who wanted to reform the theatre in keeping with their value systems (David Thomas 21-22).

To counter Collier, Congreve published a critique titled *Amendments of Mr Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698), and provided reasons for assessing and understanding comedy. Following Aristotle, he argued that the purpose of the genre of comedy is to instruct and delight and therefore, there is no scope to represent the idealistic characters as demanded by Collier. Secondly, he argues that the playwright's perspective should not be seen as those of his characters as they emerge in the context of the narrative. Thirdly, he highlights the importance of comprehending the context of the comic dialogue and what purpose is served by that in the overall scheme of the play. Lastly, he refutes the allegations of profanity by contending that there is no deliberate mockery of the Divine, on the contrary the satire is on the person who swears (Thomas 51-54).

Congreve seems to have a nuanced understanding of the comic tropes and how they function in the narrative to render it comprehensible to the audience. He places a lot of thrust on the significance of the context repeatedly, to understand the full import of the text and given the performative nature, the meaning can be fully derived from an interaction between all the stakeholders - authors, actors and the audience.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a discussion of Congreve's biographical circumstances and how he manoeuvred through them to carve a niche for himself in the world of writing. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to co-relate the specific circumstances of Congreve's life to those of the historical and political upheaval of 17th Century England that would enable us to understand the larger context of the changing aesthetics of drama. We have tried to demonstrate that aesthetics is not ideologically neutral but inextricably intertwined with the politics of the play. This leads to an understanding of the significance of change in Congreve's plays vis-a-vis the playwrights who wrote during the heyday of the Restoration period, and its ramifications for representation of social issues.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Describe the features of a typical comedy during the heyday of the Restoration Period.
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- 2) How did the comic tropes change under the regime of William and Mary?
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- 3) How did Congreve negotiate with his socio-cultural milieu?
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- 4) How does Congreve theorise comedy?
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- 5) Compare and contrast the value systems in Charles II's reign and William and Mary's reign.
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1.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Born in 1670, after the restoration of Charles II to monarchy. Father encountered difficulties due to his affiliation to the Tories during the Civil war. Congreve studied in Kilkenny College that not only imparted him good overall education but also laid the foundation of his interest in classical language and literature. He lived through the transitional times of the 17th century when England was divided into the ideological camps of Whigs and Tories.
2. England was divided into the ideological camps of Whigs and Tories. Anger and dissatisfaction against the unilateral policies of Charles I triggered a series of armed conflicts and political manoeuvring between Parliamentarians (Round heads) and Royalists (Cavaliers). The war ended with the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, the exile of his son, Charles II, the establishment of the Protectorate under the rule of Oliver Cromwell from 1653 to 1658 and then his son, Richard Cromwell from 1658 to 1659 and the eventual reinstatement of Charles II to the throne in 1660. The debates about good governance continued to haunt England even during Charles II's regime especially after it became obvious that he does not have an heir and his pro-Catholic brother, James would succeed him. Sensing the increasingly hostile climate, James fled away and the political developments eventually paved the way for the Glorious Revolution.
3. Thomas Hobbes - His amoral conceptualisation of human beings argued that the only way to lead a "civilized" life necessitates that we invest power in a sovereign entity. The mutually agreed upon sovereign body is the only way to create a stable and ordered society. John Locke - He argued in *Two Treatises of Government*, that the notion of government is primarily motivated by the consent of the people who voluntarily enter a contract with those in positions of authority. The people vow to abide by most of the decisions of government in exchange of protection of their freedom and property. According to Locke, this constitutes the basis of a civilised society.
4. Charles II's return from exile and taking charge of the throne in England in 1660 is called the beginning of the Restoration Period. Libertine rhetoric became fashionable. Sexual promiscuity and frowning upon conventional morality. Critique of Puritanism associated with Cromwell's regime. Pro-royalist propaganda.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Restoration comedy is characterised by sexual excesses. A quintessential rake-hero is notorious for his persuasive charm and breaking hearts. It tries to explore the definition of gender roles, sexual behaviour, class politics and the concern about striking a prudent marriage. Disparity between the expected cultivated behaviour and the Dionysian excesses to which the characters would eventually succumb.

2. The sexual promiscuity that was considered flamboyant in the plays written during Charles II's regime underwent a shift. A typical rake who was completely under the sway of appetites was modified. The ideological attitude towards both life and playwriting strove to strike a balance between the fashionable nonchalance that was typical of the Restoration literature and the emotional ardour of the 18th century. As the merchant classes were emerging as a significant social group with rising clout, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary benefits started assuming cultural prominence.
3. The socio-political environment after the Glorious Revolution changed drastically as William and Mary did not provide the royal patronage to the drama that was granted under the regime of Charles II. Reforming groups like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge further maligned the image of the theatres. The obstacles faced by Congreve in appealing to the preferences of the audience are mirrored in the prologue to *The Way of the World*. Congreve polishes the rough edges of earlier comedies and delves into understanding the intricacies of human behaviour. A kind of restraint that his protagonists exhibit in their social negotiations goes on to become the characteristic feature of his late comedies. He tried to strike a balance between the flamboyant indifference that was typical of the Restoration literature and the emotional excesses of the 18th century.
4. In an Aristotelian vein, Congreve argues that the purpose of the genre of comedy is to instruct and delight. There is no space for idealism per se in a comedy. He places a lot of thrust on the context of the comic situation and its performative nature.
5. The Glorious Revolution as a whole celebrated the triumph of the middle-class value systems as opposed to the flamboyant past times of the social elite during Charles II's reign. Consequently, Societies for the Reformation of Manners were established in 1690s to cleanse the playhouses of the lewdness and profanity that had apparently become staple ingredients of the Restoration theatre. Mounting a direct challenge to the ideology fashionable during Charles II's reign, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary privileges started gaining significance.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Aggrandizement: increase in size, expansion.

Catholics and Protestants: Catholics and Protestants have a somewhat different understanding of the function of the church. The word "Catholic" implies universal in extent and the Catholic Church perceives itself as the only true church in this world, under the aegis of the Pope. On the contrary, the Protestant Churches which came into existence after the Reformation movement in Europe in the 16th century (after Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church on October 31, 1517), do not constitute one united Church and there are many different denominations prevalent across the world. The Catholics tend to privilege the supremacy of the pope and stress on Mary,

Dionysian:

the mother of Jesus. They also believe in acknowledgement of specific saints, confession of sins to an earthly mediator and rituals and ceremonies. Whereas the Protestants regard the Bible as the only source of authority for Christian belief. They also believe that grace can only be bestowed upon human beings by God and is the only way to attain salvation. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and people and no human being deserves to be worshipped.

Dionysius was the Greek god of wine, fertility and celebration. Dionysian implies qualities associated with spontaneity, irrationality, rejection of discipline and conventions.

Echelon:

level or rank

Epicurean Hedonism:

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher (around 370 BC) who founded a school of thought that declared pleasure and avoidance of pain to be the sole aims of leading a good life. However, the 17th century interpretation of this doctrine in the Restoration Period is very different from its original concept.

Farce:

It is a literary genre that deploys highly exaggerated situations and ludicrous one-dimensional character to entertain the audience and make them laugh.

Jacobite:

This implies lending support to the dislodged James II and his descendants in their claim to the British throne after the Glorious Revolution (1688).

John Locke:

He was one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the 17th century.

Libertinism:

a worldview that practises an excessive disregard of conventionally accepted moral principles especially in matters of sexuality.

Material World:

This basically refers to the physical world we inhabit whereby our sensory faculties - sense of sight, touch, smell, taste, sound are able to grasp the tangible realities that surround us. The material world is to be contrasted with the ideal world that cannot be apprehended by our sensory faculties but is supposed to exist in a higher spiritual realm.

Puritanism:

It constitutes the belief system of a group of English Protestants of the late 16th and 17th centuries who held the Reformation of the Church under Elizabeth I as incomplete and strove to further "purify" forms of worship. Their values are characterized by a spirit of moralistic fervour and deprivation of sensory pleasures.

Whig and Tory:

'Whig' and 'Tory' were members of two opposing political factions in England, particularly during

the 18th century and the terms had assumed a lot of currency since the volatile conflict over the bill to exclude James, duke of York (afterward James II), from the succession. The nomenclature 'Whigs' came to imply Scottish Presbyterians and connoted nonconformity and rebellion and was applied to those who asserted their right to exclude the heir from the throne. 'Tory' was an Irish term implying a papist outlaw and was applied to those who endorsed the hereditary right of James despite his Roman Catholic faith.

Thomas Hobbes:

An English philosopher who is considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy.

Triumvirate:

A set of three.

Nonchalance:

This implies indifference and lack of concern.



UNIT 2 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD: A* SUMMARY

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Summary
 - 2.2.1 Epigraph
 - 2.2.2 Dedication
 - 2.2.3 Prologue
 - 2.2.4 Act I
 - 2.2.5 Act II
 - 2.2.6 Act III
 - 2.2.7 Act IV
 - 2.2.8 Act V
 - 2.2.9 Epilogue
- 2.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.5 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the significance of William Congreve's *The Way of the World* in the English literary canon by critically locating it in the historical moment of production, dissemination and reception. Though the play did not receive immediate success, it has become a permanent presence in the theatrical repertory. An attempt would be made to understand the performative context of the play especially given the fact that Congreve is dominantly believed to have popularised a new literary genre called the "Comedy of Manners."

2.1 INTRODUCTION

For Congreve, as for his most memorable dramatic protagonist, Mirabell, striking a balance and not giving into excesses becomes an underlying feature of their worldview which is also symptomatic of the changed politico-social ethos under the constitutional monarchy of William III and Mary II who champion Whig moderation and middle-class values associated with perseverance and the Protestant work ethic. Consequently, the trajectory of Mirabell's and Millamant's romance will be traced keeping in mind this fact, along with paying attention the scheme of things in the play. The operation of desire is interwoven with assurances of financial stability and the two concerns will intersect in an ideal marriage. Thus, we have provided a summary and an analysis of the five acts with an intention of closely reading them so that we become equipped with the requisite textual framework to connect the inside world of the text to the extra-textual sources. Let us begin by summarising the play, but please note that this summary is not in lieu of reading the original play.

2.2 SUMMARY

Congreve precedes the play with two quotations from Horace's second satire.

These translate into English as "You who seek retribution against adulterers will be happy to learn that they are impeded on all sides" and "[She is] afraid for the dowry."

2.2.1 Epigraph

These two quotations set the mood for the play that is going to deal with the protagonists who will indulge in Machiavellian politics in the beau monde for the sake of romance, power and money. By quoting from an already revered writer, Horace, Congreve is also trying to locate his work in an already established literary tradition. The dedication shall be discussed next.

2.2.2 Dedication

Following the conventions of his time, Congreve starts the play by preceding it with a dedication full of effusive praise for "the Right Honourable Ralph, Earl of Montague, Etc." In this cleverly worded letter, Congreve also expresses his dismay about the fact that the audience was not favourably predisposed towards his play and mocks them for lacking the discernment that according to him is a prerequisite for appreciating a satirical comedy. Congreve has often been hailed as the pioneer of the "Comedy of Manners" which is dominantly understood to be a genre where "affectation" is the biggest social flaw rather than a natural folly. Consequently, he also tries to elucidate the difference between comic characters which embody "affectations" and "humours" and argues that he has tried to strike a balance lest his comedy starts resembling a farce and in a pompously humble manner, indirectly traces his lineage to that of Aristotle whom he calls "the greatest judge of poetry." Let us look now at the Prologue.

2.2.3 Prologue

In an ironical vein, Congreve again continues to poke fun at his audience for not being witty enough to understand his play. The satire is also directed at the self-proclaimed morality bandwagon had assumed a lot of cultural prominence under the rule of William III and Mary II and were continuously targeting drama for supposedly corrupting society with its lewdness and subversive wit. Since the very function of satire is social correction with entertainment, Congreve proclaims in a mocking tone that his contemporary society is already reformed and needs no change. Moreover, he also highlights the difficulty in pleasing an audience that is so quick to take offense and cannot take a joke in a light-hearted manner. Having discussed the beginning let's begin straightaway with a summary of Act I next, followed by its analysis.

2.2.4 Act I

Summary

The very opening scene takes place in the chocolate-house and foregrounds Mirabell's defeat at the hands of Fainall in a card game. Soon, it becomes obvious that Mirabell is very fond of Millamant, niece of Lady Wishfort. Even though he is well aware of what he considers as faults in her personality. The conversation further highlights that Lady Wishfort dislikes Mirabell because at one point of time, he feigned affection for her in order to disguise his feelings for her niece. Lady Wishfort's ego is offended when she becomes acquainted with the truth. Lady Wishfort holds half of Millamant's inheritance and her consent becomes very important for her marriage to Mirabell. Soon a servant informs Mirabel that his valet has got married and it becomes evident that Mirabell is plotting some intrigue but its full import is not made clear in this act. Two gentlemen named

Witwoud and Petulant make an entrance and it is foregrounded that both of them have taken a fancy to Millamant but only because she is the current cynosure in their social circle. Even Witwoud's elder brother, Sir Willful, is expected to join them in a short while because he too wishes to court Millamant. We are also made aware of the fact that Mirabell's uncle will court Lady Wishfort and after giving away all these details, these men depart for a promenade.

Analysis

The first act does not reveal too many details but leaves the readers/audience with vague ideas about social intrigues and conspiracies that will constitute the play and will unfold in the subsequent acts. A palpable sense of hostility seems to hover between Fainall and Mirabell. Fainall doubts the nature of relationship between Mirabell and his wife, Mrs. Fainall, before their wedding. Moreover, he has good reason to believe that his mistress, Mrs. Marwood harbours a secret passion for Mirabell. Similarly, Mirabell is not entirely unaware of these suspicions and in fact, believes that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress.

Even though the conventions of his time forbid Mirabell from writing panegyrics for his beloved, his love for Millamant is carefully concealed in the continuous witty bantering. Witwoud and Petulant are the stock fops and false wits that populated restoration comedies and lack a discriminating ability. While Witwoud is the false wit, Petulant is ridiculous in his hyperbolic gestures about always being desired by others. These flaws give a sneak peek into the various attributes that could be considered as causes for ridicule in Restoration Society. Witwoud and Petulant do not serve a major function in the play except to highlight the wittiness of Mirabell, the ideal gentleman in the social scheme of the play.

2.2.5 Act II

Summary

Now the action shifts to St. James Park, where Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood are immersed deeply in a conversation about men and how to wield power over them. Though they try to maintain the facade of friendliness but the cracks also become obvious when they discuss Mirabell. Mrs Fainall has a suspicion that Mrs Marwood has feelings for Mirabell. When Fainall and Mirabell make an entrance, Mirabell and Mrs Fainall exit, leaving Fainall and Mrs Marwood. We are now officially made privy to the information that Mrs Marwood is the mistress of Fainall and he only married his wife so as to be able to sustain his relationship with Mrs Marwood financially. As it is evident, Mrs Marwood and Fainall's relationship suffers from a lack of mutual respect and trust. In fact, Fainall can see through the fact that Mrs Marwood's feigned antagonism for Mirabell is actually love in disguise. Their verbal altercation comes to an end when Mrs Fainall and Mirabell come back. The conversation between Mrs Fainall and Mirabell reveals that they have been lovers in the past when she had been a widow, in fact, her marriage to Fainall was contracted to cover up the affair and a pregnancy scare. Mirabell also tells Mrs Fainall about his schemes to trick her mother, Lady Wishfort and eventually marry Millamant. He has arranged for his valet, Waitwell to pretend to be his uncle and take the name of Sir Rowland and court Lady Wishfort. But since Mirabell does not completely trust his valet and is worried that he might actually marry Lady Wishfort, he has got him married beforehand to Foible (Lady Wishfort's maid). Mirabell's intention is to embarrass Lady Wishfort by making her enter a mock-marriage contract with his valet pretending to be a wealthy man and then blackmailing her into releasing Millamant's fortune. Now the much talked about heroine, Millamant makes her first appearance in the play. She

seems quite self-aware about the power she wields over Mirabell. Though she is witty and seemingly emotionally distanced but it becomes quite blatant that she reciprocates Mirabell's love and is willing to go along with his plan to trick her aunt, Lady Wishfort. Mirabell believes that as Sir Rowland, Waitwell would make a suitable match for Lady Wishfort; plus the marriage would enable her to avenge for his earlier blow to her ego. Moreover, Lady Wishfort would think that remarrying is a sure way of depriving Mirabell from her wealth and would therefore be in a hurry to attach herself to Sir Rowland.

Analysis

This act reveals the strains between the characters as we are officially made familiar with the facts that Mrs Marwood is indeed the mistress of Fainall. Mrs Marwood continues to harbour love for Mrs Fainall's former lover - Mirabell. This act also confirms that Mirabell has had an affair with Mrs Fainall and she is quite unhappy with her current marriage to Fainall. In Mirabell's persona, the late 17th century ideal of the gentleman with both his flaws and peculiarities is foregrounded. In an age obsessed with appearances, cultivated social graces, witty repartee and good humour go on to become essential attributes to be emulated. The fact that all the women in the play are in love with Mirabell, corroborates his success in Restoration society. Such is his charm that Mrs Fainall, an old mistress turned friend, is willing to help him woo Millamant and deceive Lady Wishfort, her own mother. She never reproaches him for having left her and then carrying on an affair with her cousin. In fact, given the ethical framework of the play, it does not contradict with the idea of a gentleman. It is almost a given that such amorous intrigues are to be conducted with proper decorum and eventually a gentleman is expected to marry only a wealthy virgin. Throughout the course of the play, whatever hindrances he encounters in order to marry Millamant, are never seen as a product of his past affair. The fact that Mrs Fainall continues to be a great friend to Mirabell further confirms that she has no bitter feelings towards him (Gagen 422-27). We also discover that Mrs Marwood and Fainall's love affair lacks any sense of mutual respect and trust and has dwindled into a cynical wordplay. On the contrary, Millamant, despite all the social intrigues that surround her, continues to use her wit to a pleasant effect. She is conscious of her charming persona and its effect on Mirabell and her relationship with Mirabell serves the purpose of highlighting its contrast with that of Marwood and Fainall's love affair. The barriers in the way of fruition of Millamant and Mirabell's love are all external and they do not suffer from any internal conflicts per se.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What purpose does the epigraph and the prologue serve in the play?

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- 2) Critically comment on the character portrayal of Mirabell.

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- 3) What purpose do Witwoud, Petulant and Sir Wilful serve in the play?

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- 4) Comment on the virtues celebrated by the framework of the play.

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- 5) Do you feel a sense of double standard as far as the morality of the play is concerned?

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2.2.6 Act III

Summary

This act reveals the personality of Lady Wishfort as it begins by showing her hide her signs of ageing with application of cosmetics and drinking of brandy. Mrs Marwood then enters the house of Lady Wishfort, coaxes her to get Millamant married to Sir Wilful and informs her that her maid, Foible, was talking to Mirabell. While Mrs Marwood hides in a closet, Lady Wishfort reprimands Foible for breaking her trust and engaging in a conversation with her sworn enemy. Foible cleverly uses this moment to advance Mirabell's plot and tells her that he only stopped her to insult Lady Wishfort. After hearing this, Lady Wishfort becomes even more determined to marry Sir Rowland. After Lady Wishfort exits from the scene, Mrs Fainall comes and discusses Mirabell's scheme with Foible, unaware of the fact that Mrs Marwood is still hiding in the closet. They also discuss that Mrs Fainall has been Mirabell's mistress in the past and that Mrs Marwood nurses a secret passion for Mirabell, however he does not return her sentiment. This obviously fuels Mrs Marwood's rage (who is hiding and eavesdropping) especially after Millamant accuses her of being in love with Mirabell and passes caustic judgement about her age.

Soon after, when the guests arrive for dinner - Petulant, young Witwoud and Sir Wilful Witwoud, the scene almost dwindles into a farce, Sir Wilful does not acknowledge his foppish brother and in return the young Witwoud refuses to recognise his country bumpkin elder brother. Afterward when Mrs Marwood is left alone with Fainall, she elaborates Mirabell's plot. Fainall becomes sure now that he has been a cuckold and seeks revenge. Mrs Marwood then chalks out a plan for Fainall. Since Lady Wishfort controls Millamant's wealth, and since she is extremely fond of her daughter, Mrs Fainall, he can blackmail Lady Wishfort into handing over Millamant's fortune to him in order to prevent him from making his wife's affair with Mirabell public, thereby tarnishing her reputation.

Analysis

Though Lady Wishfort's character portrayal is stereotypical to some extent and is meant to provide comic relief - a narcissistic old woman too eager to lure a husband; but that is not to say that she has no individuality. She has been given a lot of narrative space and her dialogues become a self-incriminating testimony that lays bare her hypocrisies. She dares not smile or frown, lest the movement of her facial muscles mess her make-up. She is obsessed with appearances and, the tour of her private library (which has a collection of devotional and anti-theatrical books), to impress a casual visitor is proof of that fact - Quarles' Emblems are didactic poems, each with its moral attached; Prynne's *Histrio - Mastix* is an indictment of the immorality of the theatre; Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* was published in 1698, two years before the production of *The Way of the World*, "Bunyan's Works" again deals with Christian themes. She desperately wants to trap a man but does not want to come across as a woman who is hunting for a husband. She wants company but as is typical of all comic tropes, always invests in people who will eventually betray her. The critic Kevin J Gardener argues that the comedy of manners as a genre often concerns itself with the subversion of dominant authority represented by an older generation and consolidation of new centres of power. These anxieties are visualised by Lady Wishfort's desperate attempts to retain some modicum of power at a time when her weakening physical charm and dwindling authority transform her into the butt of ridicule and her familiar world is transplanted by a new kind of social order inaugurated and successfully implemented by Mirabell. His calm self-possession becomes a tool of power, the conflicts that were earlier resolved by resorting to violence in the feudal system are now to be solved by social intrigues and deception (53-56). To quote Gardner, "if a correct, convincing and invisible performance of gentility is essential to the success of Mirabell's grasp on patrician authority, it is no less vital to Lady Wishfort who fears deeply the loss of her social and sexual power. Certainly, a great deal of the comedy in Lady Wishfort's character evolves from her awkwardly mechanical bodily performances" (60).

Lady Wishfort's maid, Foible, is again a well-etched out character and is not representative of a typical maid that generally populates Restoration comedies. She is a vibrant young woman with a sound presence of mind who is very well acquainted with all the trickeries that goes on in the Wishfort household. In the scene between young Witwoud and Sir Wilfull, the hierarchy of values in the play are laid bare. Witwoud does display some modicum of wit. However, his behaviour towards his brother is not that of a Restoration gentleman, who might criticise Sir Wilfull's coarse mannerisms but would not go as far as to deny a blood relation. He does not display the cultivated demeanour that Mirabell would under the same circumstances. Although Sir Wilfull is a stereotypical Restoration country bumpkin, he does exhibit common sense and an honesty that makes him come across as a much better human being than his brother. Congreve has tried to foreground the differences between a true wit, false wit and fool and the comic tropes are organised to visibilise these traits in the characters of Mirabell, Fainall and Witwoud, respectively.

When Mrs Marwood gets to know through the conversation between Foible and Mrs Fainall, that Mirabell does not find her attractive, she becomes an embodiment of the typical scorned woman. The last scene between Marwood and Fainall foregrounds the trajectory of the play for the subsequent acts as they have come up with a strategic counterplot, to oppose the plot of Mirabell, the hero of the play.

2.2.7 Act IV

Summary

This act shows that Lady Wishfort is immersed in the preparation for the imminent visit of Sir Rowland. Sir Wilfull, though a bit drunk is still reeling under the influence of alcohol and therefore, is unable to complete his proposal to Millamant. In fact, he is so overwhelmed with her presence, that he becomes glad when she dismisses him. It becomes very blatant that he does not stand a chance with Millamant. Soon after this incident takes place another incident often called the proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant where they discuss the terms and conditions according to which they want to enter into matrimony. This scene concludes with Millamant confessing to Mrs Fainall that she is violently in love with Mirabell.

As Mirabell makes an exit, the company--Sir Wilfull, young Witwoud, and Petulant--come in from dinner. They are all in an inebriated state and Sir Wilfull is the most intoxicated of the three of them. Now, Mirabell's valet Waitwell assumes the false identity of Sir Rowland and arrives to court Lady Wishfort. Mrs Marwood sends a letter to tell Lady Wishfort of Mirabell's plot. But, Waitwell and Foible intervene and manage to convince Lady Wishfort that the letter is actually from Mirabell and is meant to disrupt Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland's courtship.

Analysis

This act foregrounds the different kinds of courtship in the Restoration context. It starts with country bumpkin, Sir Willful's unsuccessful attempt to woo Millamant. Then the Act shifts to the famous proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant which is the quintessential expression of love in the Restoration context. Beneath the cultivated exterior and the wordplay, Mirabell and Millamant are very much in love. However, both the characters refrain from sentimental excesses and at no point do they display a lot of emotions. In fact, they continue to maintain their poise throughout. Against a backdrop of erotic games and Machiavellian politics, Mirabell and Millamant stand as a couple with a nuanced understanding about worldly matters. Their love is sincere but not so consuming that they neglect material considerations altogether. In fact, they seem to enjoy a sense of mutual trust and respect for each other's personal freedom. Given the overall patriarchal set up, Millamant's laying down of conditions for accepting Mirabell is quite ground breaking. When Mirabell lays down the conditions, they are obviously an attempt to retain some of the societal sanctioned patriarchal power but by and large he does allow freedom to Millamant within the framework of marriage. Everything becomes a battle of wits however the sincerity of their love is not compromised.

The gentlemen - Petulant, Witwoud and Willful, drunk after dinner, who enter afterwards provide comic relief. The courtship scene of Sir Rowland and Lady Wishfort is actually a burlesque wooing as Sir Rowland is pretending to be a gentleman and Lady Wishfort plays the lustful widow. This is meant to serve as a contrast to the proviso scene which was characterised by the controlled display of emotions.

2.2.8 Act V

Summary

The scene takes place in Lady Wishfort's house and Lady Wishfort has figured out Mirabell's plot. Foible tries (unsuccessfully) to explain her position. Fainall now tries to encash the situation to his advantage. As Millamant's fortune of 6,000

pounds was presumably forfeit when she refused to marry a suitor selected for her by Lady Wishfort, he wants that fortune as his price for not tarnishing the reputation of his wife, Mrs Fainall. He also wants the remainder of her fortune turned over to him. He places a lot of thrust on Lady Wishfort not marrying again so that he remains the sole possessor of the property. These conditions are not acceptable to Lady Wishfort but Mrs Marwood coaxes her to accept these terms lest her daughter's loss of reputation becomes a public scandal. When the two maids, Foible and Mincing, now reveal that Fainall himself has cheated on his wife, he refuses to be stopped and insists that he does not mind a public scandal if he gets to shame his wife too. Out of the blue, Millamant agrees to marry Sir Wilfull as per her aunt's wishes and manages to salvage 6,000 pounds. Fainall finds this sudden change of heart a bit fishy but he continues to stake a claim on the balance of his wife's estate, and now also wants the control of Lady Wishfort's share. At this moment, Mirabell presents the proof that will guard the reputation of Mrs Fainall. Before marrying Fainall, Mrs Fainall had secretly signed over her wealth to Mirabell. The correct assessment of Fainall's character now comes handy. Now of course there is no money which Fainall can lay a claim to. Seething with rage, Fainall and Mrs Marwood leave the stage. Lady Wishfort after having realised the villainy of Fainall and Mrs Marwood, willingly pardons Mirabell and gives him consent to marry her niece Millamant. The play comes to an end on this happy note.

Analysis

The fifth act is replete with trickeries, intrigues and plotting and it does get a bit difficult to keep up with them at times. The villainy of Fainall is exposed fully when he is willing to walk an extra mile to bring public disgrace to his wife. It also becomes evident that for all his wit and wordplay, he is not the ideal gentleman in the scheme of the play because he is full of bitterness and beneath his polished exterior there is no modicum of pleasantness or genuine emotion. As opposed to him, Mirabell is capable of experiencing genuine emotion. He might be practical but he never lets his concerns about logistics overpower the pleasantness of his demeanour. Of course, he is not without faults and can be extremely manipulative but knows how to maintain a sense of equilibrium between self-interest and consideration for others. As the critic, Robert Markley argues, Mirabell combines the typical traits of rakish behaviour with "the emerging view of the hero as a moral man who deserves to triumph" (197). This reconceptualisation informs the persona of Mirabell both in his courtship with Millamant and his resourcefulness in bringing harmony to the chaos that had been unleashed in the household of Lady Wishfort (Braverman 27). Structurally speaking, the last act reveals how the plot of Mirabell was balanced by the counterplot of Fainall and Mrs Marwood. Their scheme is destroyed by Foible and Mincing on the one hand, and by Millamant's pretence to marry Sir Wilfull on the other. But when Fainall wants the rest of Mrs Fainall's money, Mirabell's ingenuity and correct assessment of the character come to the rescue when he shows the deed signed before Mrs Fainall's marriage, presumably as a preventive measure for just such a situation. Fainall, the fortune-hunter who would have been hailed as a gallant in the heyday of Restoration comedy, becomes for Congreve, the antagonist who despite all his wit and wordplay, lacks the amiability which is a prerequisite for the changing conceptions of a "hero." Absolutist Cavalier values are transplanted with Whig moderation. Fainall, who stands for predatory behaviour synonymous with the typical Restoration rake who had to become a husband compelled by monetary avarice, is replaced by Mirabell, the reformed rake who is a harbinger of a new order. Fainall stands for the old order symbolising that property follows political

legitimacy. Au contraire, Mirabell emphasises the victory of the negotiated contract, metaphorically represented by the legal document.

Lady Wishfort, in this act, also undergoes a change of heart and the vicissitudes of recent life experiences almost make her into a sympathetic character. Her genuine attempts to protect her daughter do redeem her character to some extent and her entrapment in the treachery of those she blindly relied upon puts her in a very unusual position. The play ends on a happy note with the promise of Mirabell's and Millamant's marriage. Their marriage has socio-political echoes. On one hand it is what Lawrence Stone calls a, "companionate marriage" which is the most perfect arrangement for conjugal bliss (325). On the other hand, a balance between claims of sexual passion and property is achieved, which constitutes the foundation of domestic ideal, (Braverman, 155).

Given his poise, charming persona, epigrammatic wit, Mirabell personifies Congreve's rejoinder to a society grappling with flux owing to the disintegration of patrician authority and the rise of new social values. His rakish charisma balanced proportionately with upcoming virtues associated with self-restraint and reliance on legality, makes him a befitting hero for the changing times that celebrate the decline of an erstwhile form of aristocratic authority represented by the Stuart era. The satirical impulse of *The Way of the World* is aimed at the unsuccessful machinations of the older social order at guarding some vestiges of authority and much of the play's comic tropes emanate from the ridiculous demeanours of the likes of Lady Wishfort in the face of inexorable changes. As the critic Gardner argues "the play's meaning, hinges on the figures of Mirabell and Millamant, who by embracing principles of civilised self-restraint, by naturalising their performances, and by solemnizing their love through legal rhetoric, demonstrate that this new social order requires one to eschew traditional Stuart authority and to develop relationships based on the principle of the law. This new vision of patrician authority, Congreve's play urges us to accept, is the way of the world" (71). However, despite its comic closure, the play leaves us with some troubling reminders - for instance, Mrs Fainall's fate is left to hang by a thread. This nagging doubt continues to haunt readers as to why Mirabell did not marry Mrs Fainall when she was an affluent widow with whom he did have an affair? They appear to trust each other and as yet, he gets her married to a dubious man like Mr Fainall when they suspected she might be pregnant? Moreover, Mrs Marwood and Mr Fainall have vowed revenge and might possibly return to make life difficult for her. In a play heavily obsessed with the celebration of youthful pursuits, a character like Lady Wishfort cannot possibly be accommodated in this happy universe and must be reduced to a pathetic, pitiable woman. However, given the comic closure and the merry dancing, all these uncomfortable questions and tensions about limited conceptualisations of morality and blatant hypocrisy of societal standards, are eventually subsumed under the rhetoric of love of the protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant.

2.2.9 Epilogue

Commentary

The epilogue only carries forward the points already stated in the prologue and once again, highlights that critics are not sufficiently equipped to pass judgement on the play and make statements without any knowledge. The epilogue also states that the characters are fictitious and do not bear direct resemblance to any individual and that the satire is universally applicable.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Critically comment on the character portrayal of Lady Wishfort.

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- 2) The marriage of Mirabell and Millamant is an ideal intersection of romantic love and materialistic considerations. Discuss.

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- 3) Compare and contrast Mirabell and Fainall.

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- 4) How does Mrs Fainall become an unsettling reminder of the hypocritical moral parameters of the Restoration society?

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2.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a summary and an analysis of the five acts of *The Way of the World* by critically scrutinising the comic tropes and the manner in which they have been strategically deployed by Congreve to address the concerns of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The play satirises the affectations and pretences of the people who inhabit the beau monde and also exposes the Machiavellian tricks they deploy to sustain their position there. The narrative politics of the play foregrounds the changing ideological landscape. The marriage of Mirabell and Millamant uphold the virtues of civilisational restraint, legality and moderation, dominantly associated with the worldview of the Whigs.

2.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. It sets the mood of the play that is going to deal with romantic intrigues of the beau monde. Gives an opportunity to Congreve to express his anger (though in a playful manner) against the audience who did not receive his play well. Congreve also tries to explain that "affectation" is different from "natural folly" and his play should be comprehended keeping that distinction

in mind. He also makes a jibe against the morality bandwagons that have been clamouring for a moral reform of the drama.

2. Mirabell is the ideal gentleman in the play who strikes a balance between a typical rakish character and an overtly sentimental hero prone to excesses. He is sophisticated and polished in his behaviour without giving the impression that he is pretending to be someone he is actually not. The fact that all the women in the play crave for his attention is a testimony to his charm. Given the double standards prevalent in his society, Mirabell does not suffer for his affair with Mrs Fainall (She becomes a very lonely woman as the play reaches its closure), on the contrary he gets to marry a wealthy virgin in the end.
3. Their exaggerated, hyperbolic personalities serve to highlight Mirabell as the ideal gentleman who knows how to balance the various attributes of his personality. Their presence also brings comic relief by foregrounding the discrepancies between their traits and the virtues celebrated by the Restoration society.
4. The play celebrates the triumph of Whig moderation characterised by self-restraint and contractual obligations rather than absolutist powers. Desire is closely embedded in financial considerations and a prudent marriage would ideally be a union of romantic love and economic stability. The uncontrolled sway of the appetites celebrated during the heyday of the Restoration of Charles II has no place in the contemporary society that is steadily aligning itself with middle-class morality and work ethic governed by self-discipline.
5. For all the playful bantering and the sprightly wit, the play has a very gendered notion of morality. Mrs. Fainall's reputation becomes amenable to a public scandal due to a past affair whereas Mirabell can merrily go on to marry a wealthy virgin without paying any price for his past shenanigans. Like all comedy of manners, the play is heavily biased in favour of the young and denigrates ageing, as embodied in the character portrayal of Lady Wishfort.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Lady Wishfort embodies the stereotypical traits of a lusty old woman and her ludicrous attempts to retain her sexual and social authority in the wake of changing ideological landscape of her society creates humour. Also, she is not merely a stock character but is highly individualised too and enjoys a lot of narrative space. The play's comic universe is heavily biased in favour of the celebration of the romantic intrigues of the young and that is why the happy closure has no space for an ageing woman who has lost her physical appeal and by the end she becomes a pitiable figure who has been betrayed by all she trusted.
2. The ideal protagonists of comedy of manners cannot be ostensibly be obsessed with money, but at the same time they cannot be expected to believe that love conquers all. Their ironic self-awareness guides them through the labyrinthine trails of love ensuring that they do not lose out on the material aspects of creating a "good life" together.
3. Mirabell and Fainall have a lot of similarities - verbal sophistication, quick wit and acumen for social intrigues. Mirabell for all his rakish charm has learnt to moderate his appetite and learnt self-restraint, whereas Fainall is impulsive and incapable of experiencing genuine emotion. His cynicism has made him a bitter person. Mirabell on the contrary, has relatively learnt

to balance the gratification of senses with consideration of others. He is therefore like a reformed rake suitable for the changing times under the rule of William III and Mary II who propagated a different set of values associated with middle-class morality.

4. Though Mrs. Fainall never gets bitter towards Mirabell for having left her, in fact she helps Mirabell to outwit her mother so that he can marry Millamant, one can sense that by the end of the play she becomes a lonely, pitiable figure. The fact that Mirabell gets a wealthy virgin, whereas Mrs. Fainall is left alone to fend for herself speaks volumes about the double standards in the sexual morality of the 18th century. Only young, wealthy virgins are worthy of a happy ending that is characteristic of a comedy of manners, whereas those who do not fulfil these credentials are eventually excluded and left on the margins of society.

2.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Affectation:</i>	Noticeable artificiality in manners, the pretence of possessing some qualities not actually there.
<i>Beau monde:</i>	Fashionable high society that is obsessed with appearances and social graces.
<i>Country bumpkin:</i>	An unsophisticated/ rustic person hailing from rural area.
<i>Epigrammatic:</i>	Clever and concise use of words for an amusing purpose.
<i>Fop:</i>	A man who is obsessed with his attires and appearance, a dandy. Such characters were very commonly found in comedy of manners.
<i>Horace:</i>	(65 BC - 8 BC) A famous Roman poet and satirist under the emperor Augustus.
<i>Machiavellian:</i>	Resorting to unscrupulous measures and deceptions to maintain authority.
<i>Repertory:</i>	A storehouse.

UNIT 3 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD: THEMES*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Thematic Analysis
 - 3.2.1 Class Politics
 - 3.2.2 Love and Marriage
 - 3.2.3 The Ideal Gentleman post Glorious Revolution
 - 3.2.4 The Subversion of Authority
 - 3.2.5 Wit and Wordplay
 - 3.2.6 Schemes, Intrigues and Deceptions
 - 3.2.7 Comedy of Manners
- 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.5 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will assist you to manoeuvre your way through *The Way of the World* by elaborating in detail the thematic aspects that Congreve has strategically embedded in the play. By drawing attention to the ideological politics of the play and understanding it through the prism of the socio-historical context of England, the intention is to foreground how generic compulsions and stultified stereotypes interact with the socio-political conditions of their time and imbue the narrative with a possibility of panoply of interpretations.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is important to keep in mind that these thematic concerns cannot be made sense of in a vacuum. In fact, the meaning-making of this play or any other literary text, is a complex process and is shaped by the positionality and ideological baggage of the readers. Keeping this framework in mind, this unit will dissect the different themes that exert their influence on the play in their own unique ways.

3.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The Way of the World is excessively preoccupied with property and wealth and retention of class privileges. The central protagonists believe that possession of property is a guiding factor to a physical well-being. The beginning of the play itself makes it evident that the protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant have resolved to commit themselves to each other and most of the plotline charts the trajectory of their attempts to ensure a materially comfortable life for themselves post their wedding. Overall, the play not only exhibits the dominant ideological impulses but also foregrounds the complexities of living in a society which simultaneously pokes fun at those values that the plotline eventually ends up upholding. Millamant's ironic self-awareness and Mirabell's gentle sarcasm bear testimony to the challenges of not only surviving but thriving in the beau monde that overvalues appearances and trifles, without themselves getting reduced to caricatures.

3.2.1 Class Politics

Lawrence Stone in his influential work *"The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 - 1800,"* describes a shift in marriage and gender relations from an alliance that privileged interests of the family over the wishes of the individual. While every age has multiple ideologies contesting for supremacy, this historical transition is played out in the play that celebrates the reciprocal love of the protagonists who collaborate with each other to outwit figures of authority, here represented by Lady Wishfort. But it is significant to be cognisant of the fact that despite glorifying rebellious lovers, playwrights like Congreve had to manoeuvre between the theatrical value of subverting social conventions for comic relief and the desire to comfort the audience that privileges of the elite will be preserved through the sexual purity of potential wives (Markley 227). Millamant for all her provocative wit is sexually innocent and marrying her will ensure a life of leisure and comfort because of the wealth that she will bring to her husband. Eventually, patriarchy is going to be upheld. In fact, as the play reaches its closure, Mirabell becomes the agent who rescues the jeopardised reputation of Lady Wishfort's house and reconstructs the social arrangements to accommodate the socio-cultural transition of the contemporary times that demands self-discipline and social restraint. Restoration society's thrust upon social performances served the dual purposes of executing a societal sanctioned authority and delineating a lady or a gentleman in an era of social flux that triggered new found anxieties. As the critic, **Kevin J Gardner**, rightly says that, "Lady Wishfort's inability to see the servant's masquerade before us nearly obscures Congreve's point that, despite the evidence of successful imitation, the differences are visible to those who look closely - whether those differences matter to anyone except anxious patricians is another issue altogether. Because of their fear of social perpetrators, the patrician class tends to mock bourgeois affectation of grace or gentility as artificial or obviously mechanised while claiming that their own is built in so thoroughly that it has become second nature" (64-65). Like every institution that intends to survive the ravages of time, the patrician class was compelled by socio-political circumstances to introspect and temper their excesses in the wake of the rising bourgeois classes that were becoming significant stakeholders. Similarly, *The Way of the World* is a deeply political play that preserves the privileges of the elite but also foregrounds that aristocratic excesses and uncontrolled behaviour of the likes of Lady Wishfort that needs to be tempered by the likes of Mirabell who recognise the value of decorum, propriety and prudence. Let us now talk about the notion of love and marriage next.

3.2.2 Love and Marriage

The play celebrates the victory of Whig moderation over the excesses associated with the aristocracy during the heyday of the Restoration period. Playful bantering, subterfuges and other tricks eventually create a possibility for romantic transactions to bloom. Exaggerated displays of emotion and excessive expressions of love become cause for ridicule. Both the hero and the heroine refrain from sentimentality and constantly pepper their affection for each other with sarcasm and ironic wit lest they start resembling characters from overtly sentimental drama.

The heroine, Millamant, is eventually exempted from making hard choices - whether she should compromise romantic love for the sake of economic survival, as she is made financially independent by an inheritance. Choosing a partner solely motivated by economic needs is anything but romantic. Yet prudence demands that money matters cannot be entirely brushed under the carpet. The most suitable marriage would be the one where falling in love ensures financial security but

at the same time, the marriage should not be contracted ostensibly for money. Mirabell and Millamant are both well-versed with the way of the world and they are able to successfully navigate through the vicissitudes of life.

The novel concerns with marriage contracts and gender issues are manifested in the several "proviso" scenes in Restoration comedies where the young lovers negotiate the power dynamics in the relationship (Munns, 144). The contemporary ideal of the "companionate marriage" that celebrates mutual reciprocity and intellectual compatibility gave women some power to "choose," but by and large, the heroine's liberty was restricted to marriage with the husband of her choice. This becomes obvious in the romance and marriage of Millamant and Mirabell especially when Millamant becomes conscious of the fact that her love for Mirabell will subject her completely to his whims and fancies post marriage. Closer scrutiny makes it evident that the play celebrates a gendered discourse of romance that despite guaranteeing women some agency, seems to have very limited parameters for women's emancipation. For all the celebratory closure, the happy ending is reserved for Millamant, the conventionally charming wealthy virgin and her cousin, Mrs Fainall occupies the peripheries of this merry-making as given the rationale of the play, she pays the price for her sexual transgressions. On the contrary, Mirabell emerges absolutely unscathed from his affair with Mrs Fainall and in fact, gets to marry Millamant, the belle of the beau monde. The next sub section examines who could be called an ideal gentleman in the context of the age.

3.2.3 The ideal Gentleman post Glorious Revolution

Mirabell is not a quintessential Restoration rake who was notorious for his persuasive charm and breaking of female hearts. He has not abandoned his former mistress, Mrs Fainall, without safeguarding her future prospects. Mrs Fainall, is also not the typical embodiment of a scorned woman, in fact, she still considers Mirabell a good friend and assists him in wooing her cousin, Millamant, and outwitting her own mother, Lady Wishfort. Much of the action in the play is an outcome of Mirabell's careful strategising and scheming. He seems to have somewhat mastered the tightrope walk of balancing his personal aspirations and concern for others without retreating into villainy or becoming the typical sentimental hero. His character portrayal is to be understood as diametrically opposite to that of Fainall who is a brazen fortune-hunter and represents aggressive sensuality and bitter cynicism.

Mirabell personifies all the virtues that were considered necessary to merit the tag of an ideal gentleman of the times in which the play was situated and needs no moral rehabilitation before he can marry Millamant, the wealthy virgin who brings both physical and cultural capital to their union. Mirabell is not an aggressive libertine like the heroes who preceded him in the plays during Charles II's reign. His character portrayal is premised upon the ideals listed out by the courtesy books of his time. All the social graces that would render a gentleman accomplished in fashionable circles comprised of polite conversation and ability to charm women. The entire trajectory of the play successfully chronicles Mirabell's mastery of conversation and self-amused outlook on the functioning of his society. Given his finer sensibilities, his wit is good-humoured and has no appreciation for bawdiness. The polished and attractive persona of Mirabell is continuously corroborated by the fact that all the women in the play are in love with him. An accomplished gentleman was expected to be well-versed with the estate of the lady whom he wanted to marry; he was also urged to take into cognisance her virtues. Mirabell is sexually experienced but there is no

suggestion in the play that he will prove to be promiscuous post marriage. Though Mrs Fainall's character development and eventual fate lend some pathos to the merry-making that occurs when the play reaches its closure, but given the ethos celebrated by the play and the social conventions of the Restoration period, there is neither any moral compulsion in the play nor does Mrs Fainall herself expect Mirabell to have married her (Gagen 422-27). The gentlemanly behaviour is also predicated upon a regulated and carefully monitored display of affections. While the play foregrounds Sir Wilful and Petulant indulging in stupid drunk behaviour, Mirabell has perfect control over his emotions, always. Similarly, Fainall for all his sophistry and intellect, often loses his temper and resorts to verbal and even physical aggression (when he points his sword at his wife) but we never encounter Mirabell losing his calm self-possession.

When Lady Wishfort gets acquainted with his daughter's affair with Mirabell, she worries only about the reputation of her house and the moral weaknesses of her daughter that made her indulge in such transgressive sexual behaviour. She never holds Mirabell responsible for any indiscretion. In fact, the entire play bears testimony to the fact that in every situation Mirabell has acted according to the gentlemanly code of conduct. Given the ethical framework of the play, Mirabell is the gentleman par excellence without any moral lapses and embodies the virtues that were cherished by his spatio-temporal location.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How is class politics in *The Way of the World* tied up with gender politics inextricably?

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- 2) Why is Fainall not considered the ideal gentleman in the play?

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- 3) What are the limitations of the companionate ideal of marriage?

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- 4) What purpose does Mrs Fainall serve in the play?

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3.2.4 The Subversion of Authority

So, while the Restoration period was initially welcomed as the beginning of political stability, it did not really live up to its promise and was often characterised by socio-cultural upheavals and dynastic uncertainty and chaos eventually culminating into the Glorious Revolution (1688) and establishment of the constitutional monarchy under William III and Mary II.

The Restoration comedies were increasingly preoccupied with a crisis of patrician authority mirroring the changing politico-social landscape of England. While aristocratic parents continued to determine the marriage partners of their children based on political and economic alliances, the vibrant young couple in the Restoration comedy mounted a strong opposition to them and generally worked out their own arrangement on the basis of romantic inclinations (Munns, 143-44)

In *The Way of the World*, which premiered in 1700, after the consolidation of constitutional monarchy and virtues of propriety, decorum and moderation, the crisis of social authority assumes a different form because power is wielded by a woman, Lady Wishfort. This play, like all Comedy of Manners plays, celebrates the youthful pursuits and romantic adventures of the energetic couple who rebel against patrician figures of authority for the sake of love. But Lady Wishfort's futile attempts to retain some modicum of power render her ridiculous not only because of her weakening social authority but also because of her ageing and decaying sexual charm. The maintenance of patrician hegemony was absolutely integral to the sustenance of the myth of social exclusivity that constituted the foundation of aristocracy especially given the contemporary times (Gardner 53-54). If one were to dig a bit deeper, it becomes clear that the young couple are often not interested in a complete overturning of the dominant socio-cultural set up but wish to stake a claim in that very culture by mounting opposition to the old generation and gradually sidelining them from positions of power (Gill 16). These tensions assume prominence throughout the play when Lady Wishfort's position is challenged by Mirabell who comes to represent a tempered form of patrician authority compared to the aristocratic excesses of the previous generation.

Many scholars have argued that Congreve's period was synonymous with Britain developing into a modern state be it economically, politically or culturally and this necessitated that the community which wielded power in society reform itself in accordance with the virtues that would prove to be handy given the ideological flux - cultivation of self-restraint and reliance on legal contracts. The erstwhile form of patrician authority that glorified absolutist wielding of power gets transplanted by a new form of patriarchal order inaugurated by Mirabell and in sync with the transforming ideological landscape of England in the wake of the Glorious Revolution

3.2.5 Wit and Wordplay

The witty language of the Restoration theatre was its most defining trait and it also mirrored contemporary society's obsession with verbal sophistication. As the critic, **Anthony Kaufman**, rightly argues that "When Congreve declares that there is some difference between a true and false wit, he is calling our attention to the fact that his comedy is structured around a skilful counterpoint of voices - a medley that clearly reveals fools, true wits and men of deep and irrevocable malice" (411-12). In the universe of the play, the way in which a character deploys linguistic resources signals the presence or absence of wit. Possession of wit was considered a prized commodity in the fashionable high society that was completely obsessed with superficialities and appearances. Linguistic

refinement was believed to be symptomatic of an ironic self-awareness and intelligence that was a prerequisite for flourishing in Restoration society. In the play, the verbal sophistication of Mirabell and Millamant makes them stand out and helps them navigate the labyrinthine trails of their society. On the contrary, a self-conscious preoccupation with mastering words, transmutes an individual into a wit-manufacturing machine, as it happens in the case of Witwoud. His speech has lost all sense of spontaneity and appears to be visibly contrived. He becomes the most ridiculous embodiment of a society that is excessively preoccupied with appearances.

For Congreve, the deployment of wit is a prerequisite of the dramatic conventions of the Restoration period. But he does not celebrate verbal sophistication simply for its superficial charm. His larger concern coincides with Dryden's conceptualisation of wit. According to Dryden, the deployment of wit also entails a traditional notion of decorum ("a propriety of words and thoughts") whose theoretical foundation provides a barometer by which false wit can be measured. Similarly, if one delves a little deeper in the *Dedication to The Way of the World*, it becomes obvious that for Congreve, true wit means more than linguistic sophistication. He seems to compare and contrast "affected wit" and "natural folly" as a theme for comedy and differentiates between farcical comedy and a comedy in which affected wit is the driving engine for creating laughter. Going by this rationale, his false wits are not natural fools but people who have not been able to successfully cultivate a witty persona for themselves. Since propriety has become a barometer to assess wit, Sir Wilful's drunken address to Millamant becomes the most farcical case of affected wit where he ludicrously stitches together bits and pieces of fashionable polite talk. Similarly, Lady Wishfort's dialogues with Sir Rowland are also replete with misemployment of words, highlighting the discrepancy between her intention and the meaning of the words. It is easy to mistake Fainall for a true wit given his verbal virtuosity but his wit makes him a megalomaniac rather than help him cruise through his socio-cultural circumstances (Hinnant 374-79).

Amused irony coupled with a thorough understanding of the functioning of the world encapsulates the primary qualities of wit and endows the thematic universe of the play with a sustainable moral anchor. Mirabell and Millamant are capable of emotional profundity for all their polished demeanour, compared to Fainall who despite his linguistic mastery does not fulfill the requisite credentials of the kind of wit that is met with approval in the play because of his hard cynicism and aggressive outlook.

3.2.6 Schemes, Intrigues and Deceptions

To claim her share of property, Millamant is ready to play tricks on friends and relatives. Mirabell is himself involved as are his servants so as to assist Millamant in gaining access to her wealth. When Mrs Fainall, Mirabell's ex mistress had feared that her affair had left her pregnant, Mirabell had strategically arranged her marriage to Fainall to quell any scandalous rumours. It is like the erstwhile feudal wars that were fought on the battlegrounds have transmuted into social scheming in the drawing room and all the characters are fighting tooth and nail with words to retain some modicum of power in the societal politics. Money and romance are inextricably intertwined in the social scheme of the play and most of the characters seem to be more worried about reputation than with actual morality of the issue at hand.

The plot carefully engineered by Mirabell to embarrass Lady Wishfort by making her enter a mock marriage with his servant and then blackmailing her to release

Millamant's inheritance is met with a befitting counterplot by Mrs Marwood and Fainall who blackmail Lady Wishfort into handing over all the wealth under her name. As expected, Mirabell's ingenuity and resourcefulness helps him to triumph over all obstacles but it becomes clear that familiarity with the way of the world is a prerequisite to tackle the societal politics and negotiate one's position in a social space that is no less than a labyrinth. So while all characters scheme and try to manipulate the situation to their advantage, some like Mirabell and Millamant manage to retain the liveliness of their personalities and emotional depth and others like Mrs Marwood and Fainall degenerate into aggressive sensualists with no genuine emotions.

3.2.7 Comedy of Manners

Congreve has been dominantly considered to have popularised the literary genre of the Comedy of Manners and *The Way of the World* is a quintessential example of this. As a theatrical form, it is a social satire about the mannerisms of the beau monde. It usually has stock characters like a country bumpkin who is unable to fit in the witty city social circles, fops and older women who are having a hard time reconciling with their ageing body etc. The interrelated themes of gender, sexuality and marriage are played out in various permutations and combinations in Restoration drama. The Comedy of Manners is the perfect genre to explore these thematic concerns as it tries to foreground the definition of gender roles, sexual behaviour, class politics and the obsessive concern about striking a prudent marriage. Different kinds of courtships unfold over the course of the play in question, be it the emotionally restrained romance of Millamant and Mirabell or the ridiculous courtship of Sir Rowland and Lady Wishfort. Though often conservative in its closure, the comedy of manners charts out a new model of marriage based on intellectual compatibility. The possibility of unsavoury marital alliances serves as trigger points of the plot. The kind of discrepancy between the polished demeanour that people maintain with their public persona and their basic human appetite also, often evoke humour, for instance, Lady Wishfort's malapropisms. Social capitulations, romantic intrigues and cuckolding also constitute the plotline.

However, it is not difficult to unearth the gendered discourses on romance in such Restoration comedies. Social vicissitudes such as the economically vulnerable position of women and conflicts of desire and virtue shape the play. A quintessential heroine of this genre would never let down her guard and would win over her lover with her calm self-possession. Her bantering might be provocative but sexually she will be innocent (Gill 198). Millamant might be very good at wielding the linguistic resources at her disposal but as far as carnal matters are concerned, she is a complete novice and her virginity confirms that. A typical hero of this genre would be notorious for his persuasive charm, witty repartees and resourcefulness. Mirabell embodies all these virtues along with all the social graces that render him very agreeable in his society. Their eventual marriage is premised upon a social order based on class affiliation and clearly defined gender roles.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Is the play attempting a radical challenge to figures of authority?

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- 2) What does the continuous plotting and scheming in the play imply about the beau monde?

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- 3) How is *The Way of the World* a quintessential comedy of manners?

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- 4) What does linguistic refinement convey in the scheme of the play?

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3.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to engage with the important thematic aspects of *The Way of the World* by highlighting their socio-political relevance for the time frame in which the play is situated. A detailed analysis of how the plot closely revolves around class politics, gendered nature of romance, the deployment of wit and satire, the rising preoccupation with values associated with propriety, decorum and prudence, has been done. An attempt has been made to help you understand the reasons for the popularity of the play in the dominant western imagination even now and how Congreve is considered to have popularised the genre of comedy of manners that is still flourishing, 4 centuries after *The Way of the World* premiered in 1700.

3.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The exclusivity of class is dependent on social performance and most importantly, the blood purity of the lineage. To ensure the purity of the lineage, the bodies of aristocratic women were constantly under surveillance lest they engage in sexual encounters with men who do not hail from the so called elite class and "pollute" their wombs. Millamant is the belle of the beau monde not only because of her charming persona but also because of her inheritance and virginity.
2. Given the changing parameters of the "hero" under the constitutional monarchy of William III and Mary II, the aggressive sensualist Fainall does not fulfil the requisite credentials. His rakish persona and lack of conventional morality would have made him the hero in the plays written during the heyday of the Restoration period. Although he shares a lot with Mirabell especially his wit and intelligence but lack emotional depth.

3. The companionate marriage still gave women some power to choose their husbands depending on intellectual compatibility and mutual attraction. But it was a very limited form of freedom as their identity was subsumed under that of their husbands and all the gender-related issues were reduced to the rhetoric of love. Increased emphasis on finding fulfilment through domestic bliss severely shut the possibilities of alternative avenues of channelising one's potential. For instance, in the play, Millamant is very conscious that her life would become a living hell if Mirabell did not turn out to be a good husband.
4. Mrs Fainall's character portrayal bears testimony to the very restrictive avenues for women's fulfilment in the beau monde. Her affair with Mirabell had sealed her fate and reduced her status to that of a penitent woman who has no option but to reconcile with her fate. The play's happy ending has no place for the likes of Mrs Fainall and her presence works as a foil to Millamant who has been careful enough to keep her "virtue" intact.

Check Your Progress 2

1. No, not really. The play is supplanting the erstwhile absolutist values associated with patrician authority with relatively more flexible structures of power to accommodate the changing power dynamics of society in the wake of rising bourgeois. That is why the likes of Lady Wishfort need to be restrained by the likes of Mirabell who understand the power of law and contractual obligations.
2. The only way to derive fulfilment in the beau monde is to be constantly aware of the power one wields in a social space that explicitly functions on putting up of social performances. So given the tenuous nature of the position, the members of this strata of society often resort to tactics and strategies to maintain their place in a social zone that overvalues appearances where the worst thing to befall a person is a loss of reputation.
3. It satirises the affectations and pretensions of the upper strata of the Restoration period. Presence of stock characters - Petulant, Lady Wishfort, Sir Wilful. Romantic intrigues, cuckolding, scheming constitute the plotline.
4. Linguistic refinement was considered a very important social skill to master in the Restoration society. The power to wield language conveyed a sense of sophistication and signalled possession of wit and an ironical self-awareness of society that were considered significant virtues to survive in it. However, an over conscious deployment of linguistic resources could transform one into a Witwoud who just mechanically blurts out witty repartees.

3.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Bourgeois ideology:</i>	The social classes - professionals, manufacturers, merchants, that became influential during Industrial Revolution and whose concerns are primarily related to the preservation of their economic supremacy and "respectability" in society.
<i>Cultural Capital:</i>	The possession of knowledge and behavioural skills that a person can foreground to signal one's social status.
<i>Ideological Politics:</i>	Ideology implies a systematic set of beliefs and values that shape our perception of the world around us. Ideological politics mean organizing the thought process/ values/

moral concerns in a manner that they privilege certain socio-political and economic structures over others.

<i>Malapropism:</i>	Misuse of words in a ridiculous manner.
<i>Panoply:</i>	A wide spectrum.
<i>Patrilineal:</i>	Determining descent through the male line.
<i>Patrician:</i>	Aristocrat
<i>Stultified:</i>	To render something ridiculous
<i>Trajectory:</i>	Curve
<i>Transgressive:</i>	A breach of conventional morality or violation of a law



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UNIT 4 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD:* SYMBOLS, ALLEGORIES AND MOTIFS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Analysis of Major Symbols, Allegories and Motifs
 - 4.2.1 Lady Wishfort's House
 - 4.2.2 Makeup
 - 4.2.3 The Mall, St. James Park and Chocolate House
 - 4.2.4 Masks
 - 4.2.5 Title of the Play
 - 4.2.6 Legal Contract
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will do an in-depth analysis of the major symbols, allegories and motifs in *The Way of the World*. The endeavour will be to assess them vis-a-vis the contexts in which they appear and then examine their contribution to the progression of the narrative.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis of the symbols, allegories and motifs will make you aware about the working of the ideological politics of the playwright. The narrative spaces enjoyed by the different symbolic structures/ presences give us a sneak-peek into the socio-political and cultural belief systems espoused by Congreve and the parameters that readers/ audiences are expected to keep in mind while understanding the play.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF MAJOR SYMBOLS, ALLEGORIES AND MOTIFS

Lady Wishfort's House is the locale where most of the drama unfolds, making it obvious that the play primarily deals with deceptions, trickeries and conspiracies in a family that is symptomatic of the larger crisis happening in the macrocosm of 18th century society. Compelled by forces of change and caught in the quagmire of conflicting values, Lady Wishfort's house is on the verge of collapse, literally and metaphorically.

4.2.1 Lady Wishfort's House

Despite her legal power, her inability to circumvent the financial crisis created by Fainall makes her vulnerable to loss of her property as well as a public scandal about her daughter, Mrs Fainall's affair. Allegorically, the house represents an

older value system of patrician authority that is gradually losing its relevance in the wake of the constitutional monarchy established under William III and Mary II. Unlike the erstwhile feudal values, new principles associated with mercantile capitalism are assuming prominence and unless she transforms herself and her kinship structures (according to the emergent value systems), neither she nor her house will survive. The feudal excesses need to be checked, regulated and monitored in keeping with the changing times.

Mirabell, her niece's lover, represents the force of change that will also be the agency and resourcefulness to tide over the crisis that is looming over her house. Eventually, Lady Wishfort is driven by circumstances to seek the help of Mirabell, her former enemy, to rescue her and preserve the reputation of her family. Lady Wishfort's house is at last saved by Mirabell's intervention, giving out the larger message that expression of violence or physical force is no longer a viable means to safeguard oneself and the modern socio-cultural economy demands resourcefulness of a new kind if the patrician class does not want to become redundant. Nobody in the play can match up to his linguistic sprezzatura and calm self-possession even in the most trying of circumstances. So no wonder, he is almost single-handedly responsible for bringing order and stability to the chaos that has been brewing in Lady Wishfort's house for so long.

4.2.2 Makeup

The triangular relationship between women, makeup and society has mostly been fraught with irreconcilable contradictions in the dominant imagination. The relationship between women and cosmetics become more tenuous when it involves older women. The contemporary feminist critic, Nivedita Menon deploys the nude-make up analogy to deconstruct the functioning of the normative social order. The idea behind nude make-up looks are all about one's skin looking impeccable without looking like one is even wearing any make-up at all. To achieve this flawless look all one needs is a series of products that will give the skin a 'natural' looking glow. Sustaining the social order and preventing it from turning into chaos necessitates the faithful performance of the prescribed rituals over and over again throughout one's lifetime. Highly complex networks of socio-cultural reproduction go into it. But the ultimate aim of this relentless activity is to produce the semblance of untouched naturalness (Intro vii). When the effort starts showing too much, it becomes a cause of concern or the woman becomes an object of ridicule. This is exactly what happens in the play.

In Act III of the play, we encounter Lady Wishfort lamenting about her painted face and calling herself - "an old peel'd wall." Her concern with her face mirrors a deeper anxiety about her ageing body and loss of socio-cultural power. Though she has some legal power as she controls Millamant's fortune, but the limited parameters of her agency become palpable when she desperately seeks Mirabell's assistance to outwit the legal troubles engineered by Fainall. Her peeling face paint metaphorically represents her crumbling social authority and her ridiculous attempts to retain some vestiges of power. The painted face also belies the excessive thrust put upon appearances in a society that overvalues the external manifestation at the cost of actuality.

In the popular Proviso scene, Mirabell demands that Millamant's natural beauty should not be covered by painting and implicit here is the notion that his love for her exceeds mere transitory sexual attraction. However, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that Lady Wishfort's obsessive desire to cling on to her decaying physical charm is posed as the future reality that all women in the play

will have to deal with once their beauty fades. Though of course, the resolution of the play reduces everything to the rhetoric of love and downplays all female characters' concern with loss of youth and charm.

4.2.3 The Mall, St. James Park and Chocolate House

Congreve deploys the structural conventions and settings of the earlier Restoration comedies but reinvents them to render them appropriate for the new set of values that were becoming popular. Though earlier, during the heyday of the Restoration, they were sites of sexual escapades, the Mall, St James Park and Chocolate House come to serve very different purposes in *The Way of the World*. This is again symptomatic of the changing socio-cultural ethos of the 18th century society that was altering itself structurally to accommodate the values associated with middle-class respectability and mercantile capitalism.

The Chocolate House becomes a fashionable place for the people with physical and cultural capital to indulge in witty repartee, play cards - sophisticated social discourse minus any bawdiness that was a staple ingredient of the erstwhile Restoration comedies. Similarly, St James Park and the Mall are comfortable avenues for meeting friends to have a conversation or a walk. (Thomas 24)

Congregating at the James Park, Mall or the Chocolate House becomes a way for characters to signal the possession of material wealth and linguistic dexterity that was increasingly prized as a very significant socio-cultural resource necessary for inclusion in the polite society. In the play, the characters often assemble at these sites to advance a plot or discuss conspiracies to attain money, love and power, thereby foregrounding the intrigues, subterfuges and trickeries beneath the veneer of sophistication. But the play seem to be drawing binaries between conspiring to attain material wealth for physical wellbeing, striking a prudent marriage (represented by Mirabell) and plotting to gain money to satisfy aggressive sensualist impulses and avarice (represented by Fainall). Hence, as per the rationale of the play, cultural sophistication and linguistic skills need to be complemented with some sense of propriety, decorum and prudence for truly prospering in the ethos of 18th century London.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What purpose did Chocolate Houses, St James Park and the Mall serve in the Restoration period?
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- 2) Why have women always had a very complicated relationship with makeup? Explain with reference to *The Way of the World*.
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- 3) Do you think the play constructs dichotomies between plotting that is justified and plotting that is unnecessarily creating chaos?
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- 4) What is the play's attitude towards old age?

4.2.4 Masks

As opposed to the idealism of the Renaissance, which had proclaimed that honour always follows virtue, the contemporary 18th century society seemingly acknowledged that inner worth does not always guarantee success. In the scheme of the play, the ideal is a permutation and combination of beauty, intellect, social grace and youth and having them endows the possessor with some degree of power over others. Most of the characters in the play do not have these traits in the desired proportion and are trying to channelize their efforts into copying them and making a fool of themselves (Lyons 259). Nothing haunts the universe of Congreve as the loss of reputation and an excessive obsession with safeguarding reputation has led most of the characters to disguise their actual emotional deficiencies/jealousies behind masks.

The quintessential comic resolution is an action of unravelling and unmasking the imposter. As the critic, Charles R Lyons argues that "W.G. Moore's discussion of the comic mask is one of the most meaningful of recent examinations of comedy. Moore uses masks in a metaphorical sense, explaining the complexity of attitudes which exist in a finely made comedy. His discussion of the tension between reality and the affectation of social behaviour are applicable to Congreve as well (262)." Petulant and Witwoud pose as witty men but their lack of self-awareness often makes them the laughing stock. Mrs Marwood suffers from an inability to guard her passions, wearing a mask to hide the resentment she feels at Mrs Fainall's treatment of her. Millamant's indifference towards Mirabell also comes across as contrived because confessing her feelings for him would render her vulnerable. It is only Mirabell who fully understands the value of self-restraint and has effectively tamed all manifestations of passion and emotions not just publically but even in private. On the contrary, Lady Wishfort's performance is too obvious. Lady Wishfort has such poor control over the expression of her emotions that her anger makes a crack in the mask of her face paint. To quote Kevin J Gardner, "Lady Wishfort's unsuccessfully mechanized performance and her uncertainty about just what constitutes the most natural performance reveal her fear of both sexual and social instability, for not only does she secretly fret that she is no longer sexually desirable, she also obsesses over correct patrician manners."

Outward manifestations and overtly performative characteristics have taken precedence over genuine expressions and have become an end in themselves, but they cannot go on like this and need to be rectified. As James Neufeld argues that "Charming though they are, Millamant's affectations cannot continue indefinitely without running the risk of hardening into a grotesque mask. And through Millamant, rather than Lady Wishfort, Congreve does suggest the means by which correction will take place. The corrective influence is marriage," (242).

4.2.5 Title of the Play

The Way of the World is a comedy and none of the characters have been portrayed in an idealistic manner or as a paragon of virtue. The readers'/ audience's admiration for the protagonists is also coloured by the limitations imposed by comic conventions. There is an implicit understanding that there is no escape possible from "the way of the world" to an idyllic space removed from the ravages of time, therefore, to successfully traverse the sinuous pathways of this world it is necessary to develop self-awareness, knowledge of functioning of society and amused irony (Kaufman 425-26).

The protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant have been able to distinguish themselves from the others by their ability to view their society the way it is, neither glorifying it nor vilifying it. Amidst all the chaos and mess, they have managed to retain an ironic self-awareness of the world. But they have not let the logistics of living and practical considerations dim their emotional depth. Nor have they permitted the vicissitudes of life to transform them into bitter cynics. Their courtship and marriage bear testimony to their very pragmatic outlook that acknowledges that while mutual love and respect constitute the fulcrum of a healthy marriage, material resources are pre-requisites for a comfortable marital life that will grant both husband and wife some personal freedom within the overall framework of companionship.

The play is not trying to hanker after utopian possibilities in some higher realms but seems to be foregrounding that the Hobbesian power struggle could be tempered with the proper cultivation of virtues of self-preservation, decorum, propriety and prudence. The denial of human appetites will only create repression that will manifest itself later in very troubling forms, but excessive indulgence will also create anarchy. It seems to indicate that neither radical destabilisation nor passive acceptance is the solution. But striking a balance between extremes of behavioural traits is very important for navigating through these mundane societal issues. Given the narrative progression of the play and its closure, no other title could have been more befitting than "The Way of the World" because by deploying irony and sarcasm, Congreve is celebrating 18th century society in all its contradictory rhythms.

4.2.6 Legal Contract

The Way of the World manifests the ethos and value systems of the new age following the Glorious Revolution and consolidation of the constitutional monarchy under William III and Mary II. On one hand, the power of the monarchy was restricted, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie was emerging as a significant stakeholder as far as the economy was considered and gradually their moral principles started penetrating the social fabric of 18th century society. If monarchy was premised upon a sense of contract and consent, the same was true for all human relationships. The rising merchant class dealt with the palpable realities of money and property in daily life, consequently, they prioritised contractual commitments over handed down entitlements (Thomas 21). Congreve, following John Locke's philosophy, believed that we live in a society ridden with divisive forces and contentious issues, but it can be made liveable with the help of legal contracts and arrangements. The driving impulses of the play are the plotting and counter-plotting by the characters and in the process this somewhat Hobbesian power struggle is rendered prominent. But the ending foregrounds that these traits could be regulated and controlled through contractual obligations. In Congreve's

social scheme, money and property constitute the fulcrum of a civilised society. In the play, amidst contracts that were made on the basis of expediency and monetary avarice, stands the contract mutually entered by Mirabell and Millamant before marriage - that acknowledges the flaws in each other, potential sources of contention and the structural issues in how their society functions. On one hand, this contract is a very practical understanding of human relationships, belying that love does not conquer all. On the other hand, this is a step towards equality in marriage. Given the trajectory of the play and the spatio-temporal location, the contract also represents that the only manner in which human beings can stay together amicably is through binding arrangements.

Similarly, an obsessive concern with property and material comfort contours the progression of the play. Mirabell indulges in a series of machinations against his beloved's aunt so that he can safeguard his marital future. In fact, all the characters in the play seem to share a general understanding that material wealth is a prerequisite for a relatively happy and secure life but this is to be contrasted with an aggressive pursuit of money solely motivated by avarice. Mrs Fainall had handed her entire property to Mirabell, prior to her marriage with Fainall and this correct estimation of Fainall's character proves to be handy when he tries to stake a claim in her property in exchange for not tarnishing her reputation. The existence of a prior legal contract saves Mrs Fainall's reputation and autonomy and foils Fainall's conspiracy. Not only this but the contract also rescues Mrs Fainall, and helps Mirabell to marry Millamant happily with her aunt's permission (Thomas 34-36).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Does the play uphold bourgeoisie ideology and mercantile capitalism?
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- 2) What is the play's solution to the Hobbesian power struggle?
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- 3) 18th century society overvalues appearance. How are Mirabell and Millamant truly the creatures of their time and yet different from the other characters in the play?
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- 4) If the monarchy were premised upon a sense of contract and consent, the same becomes true for all human relationships. How is this true for the universe of *The Way of the World*?
.....

4.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has undertaken an analysis of the major symbols, allegories and motifs that populate the universe of *The Way of the World* and has critically engaged with them to understand the ideological politics of the narrative. The symbols and motifs cannot be divorced from 18th century England that was slowly transitioning from an extremely feudal society characterised by rigid hierarchies to a relatively fluid social order which started prizing personal merit over inheritance. This unit has helped you to make sense of the major symbolic presences in the story, which contour the narrative and make it possible for readers to read it from alternative perspectives, by going against the grain.

4.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. These were popular places where the fashionable elite gathered to hone and exhibit their linguistic virtuosity, social graces and mannerisms. Visiting these places endowed the people with cultural capital and facilitated their inclusion in the polite society. During the heyday of the Restoration period, they were often seen as sites of sexual shenanigans, but after the Glorious Revolution, they became places for sophisticated social discourse.
2. Women across time and culture often have had to deal with societal pressure to look perfect and consequently, they have often been mocked for their attempts - application of cosmetics and makeup, to get that flawless skin texture. The Restoration society placed an excessive thrust on appearances and took the obsession with appearing perfect to its logical extreme. While society is still gentle in its mocking of the young but when it comes to old women (who clearly have lost certain privileges owing to their lack of physical attractiveness) desiring to appear youthful, the tone often becomes bitter and harsh. Lady Wishfort is a butt of ridicule because of her inability to come to terms with her ageing body and her relentless efforts to look young and sexually desirable.
3. All the characters in the play actively participate in machinations to attain their personal agendas. But the play creates binaries between characters who plan and plot to secure their future (For instance, Mirabell) and characters who conspire to aggressively pursue wealth to fulfil their greed. (For instance, Fainall). So the play celebrates pursuit of wealth to lead a harmonious life but vilifies accumulation of wealth for its own sake.
4. A comedy of manners conventionally celebrates youthfulness and merrymaking. This celebration is often characterised by the young claiming the forefront of action and sidelining the older generation. By the end of the play, Lady Wishfort is betrayed by all she blindly trusted and is reduced to a pitiable figure, stripped of whatever little power she had in the beginning.

Check Your Progress 2

1. *The Way of the World* expresses the ethos of the new age following the Glorious Revolution and consolidation of the constitutional monarchy under

William III and Mary II. The rising merchant class dealt with the tangible realities of money and property in their everyday life, consequently, they privileged contractual commitments over handed down entitlements. In Congreve's social scheme, possession of money and property constitute the fundamentals of a civilized society and human beings should learn how to manage their wealth and lifestyle following the principles of decorum, propriety and prudence.

2. Congreve, following John Locke's philosophy, argued that society is replete with contentious issues, but it can be made enduring with the help of legal contracts and arrangements. The Hobbesian power struggle is a given fact of human existence but it can be tempered through contractual obligations that have to be adhered to in order to save oneself from legal repercussions.
3. Mirabell and Millamant have successfully internalised the ethos of their time and learnt to manoeuvre through the labyrinthine byways of the 18th century society. They have a pragmatic outlook about life and do not view their existence through a romanticised vantage point. However, despite living in a society obsessed with superficialities and trifles, they have managed to retain emotional depth and thoughtfulness.
4. The Glorious Revolution championed the Whig cause and aligned itself with middle-class aspirations and values. This new system of values was in direct contradistinction to the erstwhile monarchical excesses and arbitrary exercise of power. This also trickled down to the microcosm of society and a sense of contract premised upon consent becomes the guiding force of all human relationships, for instance, the proviso episode in the play. In fact, the play as a whole is full of legal arrangements and contractual obligations and successful navigation through these legalities is the road to power and prestige in the 18th century socio-cultural and economic milieu.

4.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Belie:</i>	To misrepresent
<i>Feudal:</i>	This is related to the system in which people were given land and protection by people of higher rank and worked and fought for them in return.
<i>Idyllic:</i>	Charmingly simple.
<i>Irreconcilable:</i>	Incompatible.
<i>Quagmire:</i>	Dilemma or confusion.
<i>Mercantile Capitalism:</i>	This was dominant in parts of Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries, a kind of proto-industrialization. This was also responsible for driving forward the imperialism of this period.
<i>Sprezzatura:</i>	This is an Italian word that makes its first known appearance in Castiglione's <i>The Book of Courtier</i> (1528). This word implies a certain attempt to strategically disguise all art so that every action or utterance appears to be effortless.
<i>Utopic:</i>	Related to an ideal place

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Block**4****THOMAS GRAY: *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD***

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Unit 1**Thomas Gray: Introduction to the Life, Times, & Works** 139

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Thomas Gray: *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

This block is an SLM (Self Learning Material) to **Thomas Gray's** poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. This block contains **4 Units** that will help you gain a comprehensive understanding of this poem that has been very well-anthologised and has retained its popularity since the time of its publication.

In **Unit 1** we will give you an introduction to Gray, the man, his literary career, and the socio-political and cultural background necessary for a better appreciation of this very complex poem, along with the history of its publication and reception in its time. There is also a rough chronology provided that will help you understand some literary markers of the age better.

Unit 2 offers annotations and notes to the text of Gray's *Elegy*; a ready reference that contains extensive discussions of each of its stanzas, in alternating summary and critical analysis. Formal poetic matters like the classicism of Gray's writing pertaining to choice of genre, rhyme and metre, figures of speech like metaphor, allusion, ambiguity, irony, etc. are also dealt with in these analyses. You must remember that more than one close reading of the poem is needed to fully appreciate the somewhat contradictory ideas that underpin its seemingly sympathetic and melancholy surface.

In **Unit 3** we address the various themes that may be identified as Gray's overt reasons as well as his hidden compulsions for the writing of this complex poem. Some of these themes relate to broad questions of representations of the city and the countryside; the idea of lost joys and communities; the nature, forms, and limitations of memorials; disparities of power and privilege and their losses and collateral gains; besides a few other themes addressed later. In probing deeper into these overarching socio-cultural concerns, we sense the poet's own contradictory self-positioning as a scholarly urban writer celebrating the melancholy lot of 'unlettered' rural communities. We are certain that as students of literature, you will also bring your own critical and intellectual ideas to draw a fuller picture of the poem and the age in which it was written.

Unit 4 carries summaries of useful critical essays on Thomas Gray and the *Elegy* to aid your further study. You may add to this critical research by selecting books and articles from among the suggested reading lists provided, and browsing library shelves or surfing the net to explore it further.

We have placed simple exercises within or at the end of each Unit by doing which you could check your progress. There are also suggested links given to aid you in re-reading parts of these units to enable you to answer the questions given in the exercises. Please complete each of the exercises before you move on to the next section. Now let us turn to the first Unit on 'Thomas Gray: Introduction to the Life, Times, and Works'.

UNIT 1 THOMAS GRAY: INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE, TIMES, AND WORKS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Thomas Gray: The socio-cultural background
- 1.3 Gray: Life and Literary Works
- 1.4 The Poet and Society
- 1.5 The Literary and Historical Context of Gray's *Elegy*
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.8 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- describe the cultural milieu of mid-eighteenth century England
- discuss the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century
- distinguish between the value and use of the various names for this period
- relate Gray's personal and social context to the writing of his poetry
- describe the nature of Gray's poetic choices and his broad concerns for poets and poetry in his time
- give an account of the history of the *Elegy*'s publication and reception in its time

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we introduce you to the life of **Thomas Gray** and familiarise you with the span of his poetic career. We also wish to make you acquainted with the culture of mid-eighteenth century society in England that forms the context relevant to the understanding of the position of poets and poetry in this transitional period. This historical context will allow you to place Gray within his social milieu as also make clear the complex ways in which the poet attempts to reach out in the *Elegy* to an ever receding, and reduced, audience for poetry. Further, you will get information on the range of Gray's writings, the nature of the poet's classicism as reflected in his formal choices against the literary practices of his day, and the socio-economic reasons behind the thematic debate within the text of the very compelling poem that you are studying. Let us look at Gray's socio-cultural context next.

1.2 THOMAS GRAY: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The period within which we can contextually place the poetry of Thomas Gray is identified in English literary history often by titles like 'Age of Sensibility', 'Mid-Eighteenth Century Poetry', or 'Pre-Romantic Poetry'. We will later take some account of the context behind these markers of the age, in explaining

why this period is considered as tending towards 'sensibility'. We will seek to understand why the mid-century writers are thought about as anticipating the style and sensibility of the Romantic era. The very plural quality of such markers suggests that critics have been uncertain about the accuracy and logic of these classifications, while at the same time feeling the need to use them for some clarity on this literary period.

A primary reason for the critical need to separate the earlier more public poetry of the Augustan writers, (self-termed thus, for their presumed linkage with the refined literary times of Augustan Rome, from 27BCE to 14CE) John Dryden, Alexander Pope, John Gay or Jonathan Swift from the poetic styles of Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray, **William Collins**, **William Cowper**, **George Crabbe**, **Edward Young**, **Mark Akenside**, or **Oliver Goldsmith** is that the writings of these latter mid-eighteenth century poets reflect a distinct culture, socio-politically speaking.

To some extent the changed character of these writings may be attributed to alterations in the public sphere that negatively affected the kind of political patronage that had often supported many earlier writers. By the term 'political patronage' we understand the propagandist use that politicians of the time made of contemporary writers and how they supported them both socially and economically. Thus, writers in early to mid-18th century looked upon the political events and culture as a means of economic subsistence, hence very often writing commissioned pieces.

The death of the leading Whig minister, Robert Walpole in 1742 led to a decline in poetry serving party political purposes. This event became a turning point for poetry that overtly reflected and commented on government and public matters. Less and less inclined to seek political patronage for the publication of their writings, poets of this later period drew away from topical subjects, from both poems of praise of public figures as well as from satirical attacks on politicians and government policies. They turned instead to broader social, moral and even personal issues while using a deeper, more reflective tone in their poetry. Thus, clearly there is a need to understand the character of what is sometimes also called the Age of Johnson by examining both its continuities with, as well as its discontinuities from the earlier, more politically orientated, Age of Dryden and Pope.

The 'long eighteenth century' of English literature beginning with the Restoration era writings of Dryden (post 1660) and culminating with the radically changed expectations from poetry initiated by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is informed by certain common cultural values that remain respected throughout this time. It is a commonplace of literary history that the classics, or the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, profoundly influenced Restoration and 18th century poets. Literary ideas of 'taste' and 'wit' throughout this period look back to the grace and beauty of classical writings. In this ethical and aesthetic desire they show their debt to the past culture, in open acknowledgement of reverence for the 'Ancients', as they are labelled. This period of the 18th century is hence, also termed the 'Neo-classical' age.

But an interest in the texts of the past was not a new one. A classical revival had already been under way since the European Renaissance in the 15th century, and a classical humanist education in English grammar schools and in universities had further strengthened cultural and literary links with the ancient texts. Knowledge of Latin and some Greek was also considered fundamental to a good education

for a gentleman. In the late 17th and early to mid-18th century England these Ancients were to become the subject of much heated debate and controversy among writers and critics. The neoclassic ‘rules’ developed out of the older texts by Italian and French critics had been followed faithfully by many English writers of the Augustan period while others refused to accept these unquestioningly as doctrines for their own literary expressions. A relatively aristocratic reading and writing class felt and showed great interest in classical learning thereby aspiring to ideas of taste and wit, order and reason, decorum and moral instruction drawn from the philosophical and literary treasury of the classics. The dominant drama, poetry, prose and satire of the long eighteenth century shows the impact of this past tradition as well as the marks of a rising social and political restlessness generated by events in the contemporary public arena.

The early 18th century Augustans, so considered self-reflexively by political analogy with the powerful and stable reign of **Augustus Caesar** in classical Rome (27 BCE-14 CE), favoured the urbane style of the classical poetic models, Virgil (70-19 BCE), Horace (65-8 BCE), Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE), and even satirised the inadequacies of their contemporaries in the styles set down by Horace, his disciple Persius, and the later satirist Juvenal.

The Age of Dryden (to 1700), the Age of Pope (to 1744) and the Age of Johnson (to 1784) saw the establishment of classical principles, whereby the regularity of the heroic couplet set it as the predominant metre for poetry, as being most dignified in its aesthetic balance and effect. The century also experienced the gradual disintegration of these poetic principles and practices in the latter era of the poetry of sensibility and melancholy self-reflection.

By mid-century, which is the specific context of Gray’s Elegy, of his other works, and of the poetry of Johnson, Goldsmith, **Thomas Warton**, **Shenstone**, **Christopher Smart**, Collins, Cowper, and Crabbe, we witness a poetic shift from reverence towards a classicist tradition to emotional linkages with earlier English writers in a bid to create a national identity.

Literature now also moved away from the metropolitan culture and political issues and searched for alternative space settings – the countryside, as well as the periphery of England – Scotland, Wales, and Ireland – where a more authentic, original culture might be found. Such an interest in older native forms of poetry led to the ballad collections of **Thomas Percy** and **Robert Burns**, along with a revival of the primitive past of a bardic tradition by Gray, **James Macpherson**, and **Thomas Chatterton**.

This interest has been linked to a Gothic revival whereby the English medieval period rather than the Graeco-Roman classical era now became the favoured past for poets to revere. A change of voice and sentiment followed, resulting in rougher, more emotional tones and a romantic wildness being favoured, distinctly different from the elegance privileged by the Augustan poets.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What could be the reason for the many names by which the period of the mid-18th century poetry is known?

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- 2) Write a short note on the aims and styles of poetry in the period before the death of Robert Walpole.

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- 3) Discuss the term 'Neo-Classical Age'.

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- 4) With which writers did the 'Augustans' of the early 18th century link themselves and why?

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- 5) Detail some of the broad features of literature in the 'long 18th century'.

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- 6) What was the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century? Discuss why this age seems to be a 'transitional period'?

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1.3 GRAY: LIFE AND LITERARY WORKS

Born in 1716 to economically struggling middle-class parents, Gray was supported by his uncles who were assistant masters at Eton, to get the education befitting a gentleman-scholar. At Eton, Gray became friends with the well-connected and well-to-do set of people such as, **Richard West**, **Thomas Ashton**, and Horace Walpole, the son of Robert Walpole, the then Prime Minister. This 'Quadruple Alliance' as it was called, was a friendship that carried over into Cambridge. Gray spent most of his life as a scholar in Cambridge despite his dissatisfaction with the course of the sciences, as well as law that he later planned to study, both activities being abandoned by him. He preferred to travel with his friend Walpole on a 'Grand Tour' in 1738, enjoying natural landscapes and art in Rome, Naples and Florence, though the friendship underwent a rift that was not patched up till 1745.

While belonging to a family with small time commercial links, besides owning small properties that drew in rents, via Eton and Cambridge, Gray had been able to acquire a higher social standing and an easy membership to an aristocratic culture. However, with the economic and cultural rise of a bourgeoisie (the middle classes) happening within the public sphere at this time, Gray's aspirations toward aristocratic culture seem to have a problematic and ideologically contradictory status. Some of these ideological complexities are manifest in Gray's poetic self-positioning and in his argument in the Elegy that we will be discussing later.

Financial security came to Gray after the death of his father whereupon he returned to Cambridge where he spent the rest of his life leading a quiet scholarly existence as a don, reading classical and contemporary literature much like a gentleman of leisure, without publishing or lecturing.

Gray began seriously writing poetry in 1741-2, mainly after the death of his close friend, Richard West. These most prolific years of his creative activity resulted in the *Ode to Spring*, *Ode to Adversity*, *Ode on a distant Prospect of Eton College*, and the famous *Sonnet on the Death of Richard West*, none of which were published till much later. These poems are marked by a tone of loss, grief, affliction, and nostalgia for the passing of a time of companionship with like-minded persons.

In the summer of 1742, he is supposed to have begun writing the Elegy. Having been reconciled with Walpole, Gray wrote his *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes* in 1747, perhaps on Walpole's request or to condole with him. Written in the mock-heroic style, with elements of the animal fable, the satire within this otherwise playful-seeming poem is directed at effeminate luxury under the guise of the cat, Selima's vanity and fatal folly. Gray's stance here suggests a complex relationship of the poet toward the contemporary commercial culture and the economics of a rising capitalism. As with most male writers of this period, the blame for the consumerist logic of imperial trading ventures was given to women, who were often projected as the consumers of exotic foreign goods.

In 1750, after his completed *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* received the acclaim of Walpole and other friends' approval in private circulation within this coterie of sympathetic readers, on their insistence Gray reluctantly offered the poem to the publisher, Robert Dodsley. The period of the 1750s is also credited with the production of the famous Pindaric odes, *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*, as part of Gray's study of and interest in Old Norse and Welsh poetry. The imagery of these poems is largely reflective of his early romantic love of wild and rugged landscape. Both these poems use the classical Pindaric form and thus bring together the power of the epic and lyric traditions into celebrating England's native past. This turn of Gray's direction towards a public and historical theme represents his desire to imbue the figure of the poet with renewed vigour within and against the changing times.

In 1757 he was offered a Poet Laureateship but declined the honour as a man shunning publicity and moreover, aware of the reduced dignity of the post. This by the way was not the only active and public position that the reclusive poet rejected. Gray also did not wish to practice civil law that he had graduated in. Further yet, he graciously declined a dutiful secretary-ship to the British ambassador to Spain. In fact, the only position that he accepted in 1768 was a sinecure, a Regius Professorship of Modern History at Cambridge, where he was never asked to deliver a single lecture.

Gray spent his later years alternately travelling and writing about the travels, and corresponding with his friends in supremely celebrated letters that include a wide survey of European history and culture. While in residence in Cambridge he was deeply immersed in the study of a vast range of languages and traditions: the Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Celtic, Welsh, Scandinavian, and Icelandic, among others. These scholarly tastes for literature and history were in this remarkable writer accompanied by an abiding interest in music, painting, gardening and architecture. Gray died in his rooms at Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1771, much admired as a poet, and most influential to his times as a writer of great sensibility. We shall look at the society that he lived in, in the next section.

1.4 THE POET AND SOCIETY

Apart from the rather shy, reclusive and melancholic nature of the celibate poet's social persona making him stand apart from the popular public sphere, Gray's poetic output too seems to have been rather small. Critics impute the reasons for this fact to the low ambitions of the poet. On the urging of his friend Horace Walpole (a writer, born 1717, died 1797) to write more, he had responded by saying: 'If I do not write much, it is because I cannot.' The articulation of this inability is not suggestive of a true failure to write, but most likely a refusal to write a lot. In part, the reason behind the limited number of works produced by Gray relates to his scholarly bent of mind which made him prone to deep study and research, to labouring strictly and hard toward perfection, which would constantly come up against a rigorous self-criticism.

Further, an unwillingness to submit himself to the judgement of a considerably less erudite and even perhaps an ill-educated audience can be assessed from the constant hesitations of the writer toward the matter of publication. Thus, instead of placing his poetry in the hands of an indiscriminating reader, the choice of producing less for the few (often a small coterie of like-minded friends) may have been the arguably elitist reason behind these writerly anxieties. As a gentleman-scholar of some means, living a hermit-like existence within the protected portals of an academic world at Cambridge, culturally and socially Gray seems alienated from his implied readers. These readers, whom he is forced to address, largely belonging to a widening middle-class unversed in the classics, may not have the intellectual means to understand his poetry.

Thus, a more materialist assessment of his small output as a poet would lead us to the changed nature of the times within which the poet grew to maturity. The altered conditions of commercial publishing in the period and the changing readership patterns with regard to poetry might be connected to Gray's disinclination toward a market-directed mass productivity. Gray feared the destructive effects that the book trade and its mass audiences might have on literary culture. What repelled this sensitive writer was the book trade's transformation of literature into a commodity.

As the century progressed, the changing tastes of the largest reading groups are represented in the rise of a journalistic model in the form of the periodical essay, and in the growth of a public sphere reflecting on its everyday social and moral concerns in such a collaborative exercise with authors like Joseph Addison (1672-1719), Richard Steele (1672-1729), and later Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). The other dominant trend-setter in the mid-century was the genre of the popular novel that obtained for itself a mixed audience, from the point of view of both class and gender. So, with the growth of lending and circulating libraries and cheaper means of publication available to the largely middle-class writers, the reading

tastes of working class groups and of women were sought to be satisfied through this easier narrative form of the novel, as compared to the more challenging demands of a poetry based on classical models.

In such an environment, an author like Gray may have been fearful of not being understood. This dilemma of the writer may be linked to the pathology of an anxiety of a loss of authority, as may be read within his poetry and also in his concern for the passing of an old, poetic time. The figure of the 'bard' belonging to a lost, grand time, with power to move hearts is a romanticised self-reflexive trope that recurs in Gray's poetry. Some of the repercussions of these ideological tensions and anxieties are also to be read within the argument of the Elegy, as we shall discuss later.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who were the close friends of Thomas Gray at school and university? Discuss how Gray was able to rise above the class position he was born in.

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- 2) Write a short note on Gray's poetry written before the famous *Elegy*.

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- 3) What were the personal circumstances of Gray's life while writing his poetry? How did he spend his later years?

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- 4) Discuss Gray's attitude towards the publication of poetry.

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- 5) What were the changing trends of literary writing during Gray's time?

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- 6) In what way were the contemporary forms of writing contrary to Gray's own image of the poet in society?

1.5 THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GRAY'S *ELEGY*

Perhaps one of the salient features of Thomas Gray as a poet of the mid-eighteenth century is the fact that his writings are a reflection of the transitional processes which literature, in substance as well as in form, underwent in its swing from the formalised standards of a classical tradition to the freedoms which characterized the writings of the later Romanticists. The Augustan age (roughly charted in time as the writings done during the reign of Queen Anne, from 1702 to 1714) had set up rules of right reasoning, principles of correct form, and standards of restraint which in themselves have a high value as following the long approved literary examples set by classical writers of Augustan times.

The newer age, later termed Romantic, began however to look to nature and to the common person for inspiration. The essentials of this new school of literary thought and practice were a belief in the value of the individual as opposed to group acceptance, of content over form, of the subjective over the objective, of emotion and imagination over intellect and judgment. As critical readers of the sum of writings during the mid-18th century, however, we find that this newer trend is gradual in its move toward these ideas in their full bloom. We encounter herein a transitional period which was factually neither classical nor romantic, but a variable of the two schools. It is with this rather indeterminate middle period that the name of Gray has become synonymous, sometimes therefore called the time of the pre-Romantics. The problem with the latter term is that it is reductive of the inherent individuality of the writers of the mid-century, and in making their rather complex and nuanced contributions to poetry seem important only in their relationship with the Romantic poets, some of whom had not yet even been born.

Another styling of the age connects with the abstract quality of 'sensibility' that becomes identified as responsible for the changed literary taste in the arts, also significantly connected with the predominantly sentimental literature that nourished the rising form of the novel.

In order to fully understand the literary context of the writing of Gray's *Elegy*, we need to examine the phrase 'Age of Sensibility' with which we had linked the times in which this poet's works have often been classified by critics. The term 'sensibility' actually came into general use during the early 18th century, indicating the tendency to be easily and strongly affected by emotions. At this time, writers and thinkers, such as **Anthony Ashley Cooper**, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1631-1713), reacting against the practical materialist philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), began to promote an idealistic, spiritual alternative, based on the appreciation of order and harmony through right emotions, correct judgments of morality, beauty, and religion.

Joseph Addison, the essayist, in 1711 defined modesty as 'an exquisite Sensibility', a 'kind of quick and delicate feeling in the Soul'. Laurence Sterne, in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) sets a high value on this emotion, thus writing of it as, 'Dear Sensibility! Source unexhausted of all that's precious in our joys or costly in our sorrows!' This term and the ideas

underlying it, therefore, remained in fashion in this sense till the early 19th century, and occurs in the title of Jane Austen's first published novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), although this novelist is clearly underwhelmed by the excessive effects of this feeling, and who through the thematic thrust of the narrative, questions the 'sense' of giving in to too much 'sensibility'.

The poets of the mid-18th century, however, Thomas Gray, William Collins, William Cowper, Joseph and Thomas Warton, and Mark Akenside, among others, share a distinctive emphasis on feeling as an end in itself, rather than as part of some larger philosophical project or scheme. Considerably less concerned than the poets of the previous few decades to write poetry on topical themes, and less certain of the impact of their political convictions, the mid-century poets explore the power of poetry in self-reflexive and meditative exercises that delve into the processes of the poetic imagination.

The new intensification of feeling associated with sensibility expressed itself in restlessness against the urgent tenor of city culture. This left the poets turning toward delicate descriptions of nature and toward a seemingly glorious past in recovering medieval forms. The poetry also ended up seeking remote regions for subjects, and for their settings, landscapes uncorrupted by commerce and industry. During this period, representations of the countryside become touched with nostalgia for untainted cultures and landscapes. These representations had the broader effect of reflecting a kind of English ideal that is found in rural communities and indicates all that the cities were rapidly losing. This idea and ideal of the countryside, however, did not have a lot of connection with the specific spaces that were the real material on which the sentiment was expended. The very idea of the countryside as a place available to the intellectual observer (mainly the poet himself/herself) for the pleasure to be derived from gazing on it, or for the nostalgic melancholia to brood in sadness over the loss as more and more land became citified, is a passive sentiment. It is a poetic sentiment and sensibility which has little relationship with the realities of the labour of real farmers, of their harsh experiences under the threat of poverty, or of their daily struggle with the land.

This celebration of the countryside as an ethical and aesthetic ideal takes the literary form of a poetry of retreat and retirement, as in **James Thomson's** *The Seasons* and Collins's *Ode to Evening*, and pastoral poetry of the style of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. The latter poem, however, did carry a political edge, and relevance to the enclosure movement that had converted common lands into cultivable ones, whereby large holdings by richer owners ended up depriving a rural peasantry of means of labour as well as of their small lands and living spaces. Rural depopulation and emigration are shown as resulting in the 'deserted' nature of the village in that poem. Such poems as Goldsmith's ended up rejecting the prosperous gains of scientific modernisation in favour of a nostalgic vision of a lost, simple life of the countryside. It is within this melancholy tradition of poetry reflecting loss and nostalgia and the imagined values of the countryside as an idyll, that we can contextualise the impulse of a poem like Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. This poem shares with Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* a poetic and imaginative recreation of an idyllic village life, and the picture of a busy and contented peasantry.

The paradox of Gray's poem, however, lies in the fact that the inhabitants of this blissful rural space are also represented as dead, currently resting in their graves within the solitary churchyard which is the poem's setting. These latter motifs of graves, a graveyard location, and melancholy thoughts of loss, death

and bereavement, connect Gray and his *Elegy* to what has been conveniently termed 'The Graveyard School of Poetry', also sometimes, 'The Churchyard School'. Many poems of the period of the early 1740s have been classified as sharing an interest in this contemporary vogue for meditating, in poetry or prose, on melancholy subjects. The themes of such writings range from religious and moral instruction, death and life, life after death, to even invoking a morbid and sensational horror of death's physical manifestations as in images of 'skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms' (Robert Blair, 'The Grave'; line 23).

Although Gray's *Elegy* is the best known poem of the 'graveyard' poems of the period it perhaps followed the trend set by some of the other contemporary poems within this genre of writing, which are: **Edward Young's** *Night Thoughts* (1742-45) and **Robert Blair's** *The Grave* (1743). Other poems in this style are **Thomas Parnell's** *A Night-Piece on Death* (1722), **Mark Akenside's** *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744), **James Hervey's** *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746), **Thomas Warton's** *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747), apart from the odes of William Collins and Joseph Warton. Critics have pointed out that consciously or unconsciously, Gray seems to have remembered phrases and longer passages from some of these poems of the 1740s, and therefore his poem carries, apart from older classical allusions, several echoes of the contemporary poems on these themes (Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, London and Harlow: Longmans, 1969, p.109).

In keeping with such an interest, the title page of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* was illustrated with skulls and crossbones, picks and shovels, and hourglasses. In his *Life of Gray* Samuel Johnson says: 'The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.' This individual quality of Gray's poem referred to here, that of a universal appeal seems to have been borne out by the popularity enjoyed by it, in its own time as also later. Thus, for instance, one of its often quoted lines also lent itself to the title of one of **Thomas Hardy's** novels, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874). Let us discuss the elegy briefly, as we have already talked about it in BEGC 107, Block I earlier.

Elegies are lyrical poems expressing feelings of loss and sorrow while also praising the deceased with accompanying meditations on deeper questions of life on earth and death. Yet, conventionally, an elegy belonging to the classical genre popularised by Theocritus, is supposed to mourn an individual. Other famous elegies of this particularised kind are **John Milton's** *Lycidas* (1637) on the death of his friend Edward King, and **Alfred Tennyson's** *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) mourning his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam's untimely demise. The use of 'elegy' that Gray's poem makes relies, rather on the concept of *lacrima rerum* (Latin phrase that translates as 'tears for things') that represents a disturbance or disquiet regarding the human condition. As such, the rather pensive mood of the poem, its reflections on secluded life, and its contemplation of death qualify it as an 'elegy'.

The history of the poem's publication relates to the nature of Gray's personal history discussed earlier, in his close friendship with Richard West, whose death in 1742 might have been the impetus for its writing. Gray's *Elegy* was, however, not completed till about 1746, and even then the poet did not rush into print, and kept it circulating among a coterie of like-minded friends, reminding us of the idea of the 'kindred spirit' of line 96 of the poem, with whom he prefers to communicate his thoughts rather than with a vast, anonymous reading public. As such, the *Elegy* was circulated in manuscript by Horace Walpole among friends and acquaintances, and was much admired. The editors of the none-too reputable

Magazine of Magazines got hold of the popular poem, and would have printed it, the copyright laws of the time not requiring the consent of Gray. Walpole intervened on Gray's behalf, and **Robert Dodsley**, a well-known and respectable figure published the Elegy in 1751. Having been published with such haste, it went into eight editions by 1753, and was also translated into several languages due to its phenomenal popularity.

The success of the Elegy was remarkable. A critic writing in *The Monthly Review* iv 309, for Feb. 1751 commented that, 'This excellent little piece is so much read, and so much admired by everybody, that to say more of it would be superfluous'. Another reviewer praised it enthusiastically, asserting that it 'comes nearer the manner of Milton than anything that has been published since the time of that poet', which was high acclaim indeed (Roger Lonsdale, ed. *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, p. 112).

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What do you understand by the term 'Augustan Age'?
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- 2) In what way was the term 'Pre-Romantic poets' suited to classify the poetry of mid-18th century?
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- 3) Why is the term 'Pre-Romantic poets' for poets like Gray also not entirely satisfactory?
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- 4) What meaning does the term 'Age of Sensibility' convey to you?
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- 5) What were the salient features of the Age of Sensibility in relation to depictions of the countryside?
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- 6) Write a short note on ‘The Graveyard School of Poetry’.
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- 7) How does Gray’s *Elegy* qualify as a poem fitting the contemporary taste for melancholy poetry?
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- 8) Write a brief note on the history of the publication of the *Elegy*.
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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed the various literary, social, and biographical aspects of Thomas Gray’s times and life to contextualise the *Elegy*, and also attempted to understand the other broad literary periods that relate to this poem. A rough chronology of literary eras connected to Gray’s poetry is listed below to provide ready reference pointers. You must consider the years indicated to be treated as approximations and not definitive or specific markers.

1700–1799: The English Augustan Age (the name is borrowed from a brilliant period of literary creativity in ancient Rome) flourishes throughout much of the 18th century, also termed the ‘long 18th century’, the latter term also includes the Restoration period.

1740–1775: The Age of Sensibility or Pre-Romanticism, (despite its questionable classification in connection with a period yet to come) a transitional literary movement between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, that takes place in the middle part of the 18th century.

1740–1750: The Graveyard (or the Churchyard) School of Poetry, referring to poetry that focuses on death and grieving, emerges as a significant genre in the middle of the 18th century.

1775–1850: Romanticism as a literary movement arises in the latter part of the 18th century and continues until the middle of the 19th century.

1.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Note: We provide you below with suggested passages where you might find some relevant answers from reading the above Unit. However, we remind you that you need to write your answers in your own words as far as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

1. After a thorough reading of 1.1 and 1.2, you will be able to answer this question from the discussion.
2. Discuss the nature of public poetry as mentioned in 1.2 and detail the propagandist aims of poetry. You may refer to the early poets and how they wrote poems of praise and satire related to known figures and specific public events.
3. Summarise the ideas of 1.2, paras 5, 6, 7, 8 and write a relevant answer.
4. 1.2, paras 7 and 8 mention the writers of the classical age of Emperor Augustus who were influences on the 18th century Augustans.
5. Paras 4 to 8 of 1.2 refer to the 'long eighteenth century' whose features are discussed at length. You could use some of those ideas to give an overview of the period.
6. The idea that it is a 'transitional period' has been dealt with throughout this unit. Para 2 contains the names of the writers of the later age; para 4 and the last two paras of 1.2 discuss the changed nature of poetry in the mid-18th century.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 1.3, paras 1 and 2.
2. Refer to 1.3, paras 4 and 5.
3. Refer to paras 2 and 3, and the last two paras of 1.3.
4. 1.3 contains the idea of Gray writing poetry as part of an exercise of shared intellectual companionship with like-minded persons. The 5th para points in the direction of a changed social environment that may have been responsible for Gray's unwillingness to publish his poetry. Refer further to the detailed discussion of the same ideas in paras 1st to the 3rd of 1.4.
5. Refer to the last two paras of 1.4.
6. Refer to the last para of 1.4.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to the second para of 1.2 and first para of 1.5.
2. Para 8 of 1.3 refers to the 'latter era of the poetry of sensibility and melancholy self-reflection'. The early moment connected with a Romantic sensibility is also remarked upon in the poetic choices discussed in the last three paras of 1.2. Read 1.5 closely for more discussion on the growth of a Romantic sensibility in this period, and then answer this question.
3. The problem with calling the mid-18th century poetry the 'pre-Romantic' age is argued in the second para of 1.5.
4. Now read paras 3 to 7 of 1.5 and then answer in your own words.
5. Refer to paras 7 to 9 of 1.5.
6. Refer to paras 10, 11, 12 of 1.5.
7. Refer to the last two paras of 1.5.
8. Refer to para 6 of 1.3 and the last para of 1.5.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Among the other poems of Thomas Gray that you might usefully read as primary material, and also incidentally enjoy, is the delightful ‘Ode on the death of a Favourite Cat’ that has been referred to and briefly discussed in section 1.2 above. In order to relate the *Elegy* to socio-historical concerns similar to its own in the writings of a contemporary poet, portions of Oliver Goldsmith’s ‘The Deserted Village’ show certain links with idealised representations of the countryside.

For secondary reading, which provides the basis for a more nuanced and richer understanding of the poem, we would encourage you to read selectively some of the following general studies on the age:

F W Hilles and Harold Bloom. *From Sensibility to Romanticism*. (London, 1974)

Raymond Williams. *The Country and the City*. (London, 1973)

Roger Lonsdale. *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*. (London and New York, 1969)



UNIT 2 A SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOMAS GRAY'S *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Form & Structure of the Elegy
 - 2.2.1 Form
 - 2.2.2 Structure
- 2.3 Summary and Critical Analysis of the Elegy: Lines 1-16 (stanzas 1-4)
- 2.4 Lines 17-36 (stanzas 5-9)
- 2.5 Lines 37-44 (stanzas 10-11)
- 2.6 Lines 45-52 (stanzas 12-13)
- 2.7 Lines 53-76 (stanzas 14-19)
- 2.8 Lines 77-92 (stanzas 20-23)
- 2.9 Lines 93-116 (stanzas 24-29)
- 2.10 Lines 117-128 (stanzas 30-32 --THE EPITAPH)
- 2.11 Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- do a close reading/analysis of the poem independently
- relate Gray's reputation as a neo-classicist to his use of classical allusions
- discuss the literal images used in the graveyard setting
- understand the metaphors and personifications used in the Elegy
- follow the complexities of how Gray contrasts the values of the countryside with city values

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we provide you with a summary of groups of stanzas and accompanying critical analysis of the text of Gray's *Elegy*. These annotations and notes will aid you in reading the poem with a full comprehension of its cultural and literary significance. Formal poetic matters like the classicism of Gray's writing will be discussed in the various classical allusions pointed out to you. Other literary-aesthetic matters relating to Gray's choice of genre, rhyme and metre, figures of speech like metaphor, allusion, ambiguity, irony, etc. will also be noted. Detailed discussions on the matter of genre will be discussed later in Unit 3 while analysing the themes of the Elegy. Remember to go over the lines of the poem more than once in order to fully appreciate the somewhat contradictory ideas that underpin its seemingly simple sympathies and its melancholy surface. Let us begin by examining the form and structure of the Elegy next.

2.2 FORM & STRUCTURE OF THE *ELEGY*

You should be reading your text of Gray's *Elegy* alongside the following part of this unit. Given below are the line numbers and phrase-prompts for the grouped stanzas, accompanied by a summary and critical analysis, in each case.

2.2.1 Form

As its title indicates, Gray's poem is an 'elegy'. The classical genre of 'elegy' has already been discussed in Unit 1, section 1.4. It would be useful for you to refer to that portion of Unit 1 to get more details on the genre of an 'elegy'. However, despite being called an 'elegy', Gray's poem was not written to commemorate an individual's death. The cause of the lamentation here is not the death of a friend or even a single person, but the death and the limited opportunities of all the villagers of this hamlet. Needless to say that since there are several indicators that this poem links with Gray's own personal concerns regarding his poetry and its reception within a changing society, the sadness and melancholy of such anxieties take on an elegiac tone in the poem.

2.2.2 Structure

Gray's *Elegy* consists of 32 alternating rhymed four-lined stanzas, or heroic quatrains with an ABAB rhyme scheme. Its metrical unit is the typically English iambic pentameter (five iambs per line in rising rhythm). The balanced structure of the poem as a whole derives strength from Gray's skill of maintaining a classical or 'Augustan' restraint, which is never allowed to indulge in an over-emotional excess of feelings or melodramatic effects, which were usual with some of the 'graveyard school' poets like **Young**, **Blair**, and **Hervey**. The next section will deal with the summary and analysis of the *Elegy*.

2.3 SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE *ELEGY*: LINES 1- 16 (STANZAS 1-4)

We shall begin with the summary of the first four stanzas of the poem.

Lines 1-16 (stanzas 1-4)

- 1 The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
- 2 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
- 3 The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
- 4 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
- 5 Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
- 6 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
- 7 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
- 8 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
- 9 Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
- 10 The moping owl does to the moon complain
- 11 Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,
- 12 Molest her ancient solitary reign.
- 13 Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
- 14 Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
- 15 Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
- 16 The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Summary:

The tolling or ringing of the village church bell in the evening marks the end of the day. The cattle wind their way slowly over the meadow making deep sounds characteristic of cows. The farmer too returns homeward wearily after his long day's labour that has been the ploughing of his fields. While these activities go on around me, darkness falls.

The surrounding landscape seems dim to the sight in the darkening twilight-time, and the atmosphere of the place is still and sombre, except for the humming of the beetle as it circles about, and the sleepy tinkling of the bells round the necks of sheep in sheds faraway in the village.

No sounds are heard except those of the drowsy owl from the ivy-covered tower of the churchyard. The owl seems to grumble to the moon about the intruders who disturb what had been its unchallenged ruling ground at night.

Under the shade of the elm and the yew trees growing in the churchyard, the grass-covered earth rises in little mounds, under which lie the bodies of the simple villagers.

Critical Analysis:

The reference to the curfew suggests that the poem is set in evening time, since in its older sense 'curfew', (from the Old French *couvre-feu*) denotes a regulation requiring people to cover or extinguish their fires at a fixed time in the evening. A ringing of the village church bell tolling the hour indicates the end of the day's work, and time to retire to bed. 'Toll' and 'knell' work like images that both connect with the announcement of a death by solemn church bells ringing slowly in the village, in this case connected by the poet with the 'parting' or (as originally written by Gray) dying day. The concluding line of the first stanza makes the only use of the first person singular pronoun 'me', implying the meditative stance of the poet and the poem. It is clear that he is sitting in isolation in the churchyard surrounded by anonymous graves of the people of this hamlet. It is this setting that seems to turn his thoughts to contemplation, and to a certain extent lament, the lives and deaths of the inhabitants of the hamlet.

"Far-off curfew-sound" occurs in **Milton's** *Il Penseroso*, 76; the classical writer, Horace's poem, '*Beatus Ille*', *Epode ii*, 11-12 has a similar expression in 'wandering herds of lowing cattle'; Pope's translation of **Homer's** *Odyssey* X, 485-7 has 'the lowing herds return'. Gray makes powerful and lyrical use of alliteration in 'ploughman...plods', 'lowing...lea', 'weary way', as well as assonance in the dragged out, vowel sounds in 'lowing...slowly' and 'ploughman homeward plods'. All of these sound effects (emphasised in bold font in the previous sentence) contribute to the mournful quality of the poem. "Weary way" is an example of a transferred epithet in which the weariness of the ploughman is transferred to qualify the noun 'way', thus making the 'way' to be tired rather than the human. Here, Gray may be using the classical poet, **Virgil** or the following line from **Spenser's** *Faerie Queene* 6.7.39,1, 'And now she was upon the weary way'. All these classical allusions and the ambivalent syntax that often follows the forms of Latin, clearly identify Gray as a classicist despite the new tone of romantic sensibility of his poetry.

In the 2nd line of the 2nd stanza Gray makes a formal inversion of the syntax quite common in the poetry of this period. Here he leaves ambivalent whether the 'stillness' of the landscape holds an 'air' of solemnity or that the 'air' or atmosphere of the churchyard retains a kind of gloomy 'stillness' with night

descending. In this compressed line, ‘air’ and ‘stillness’ are each both subject and object. Thus, there is a tight economy that is used in the production of multiple meanings. The two lines that follow this reference describe the very minimal sounds that are heard.

In the 3rd stanza the poet uses literal images present within this landscape that recreate the typical melancholia of the graveyard style, with the owl, the moon, the old tower darkened by the ivy clinging to it, and a reference to the secret, hidden quality of this solitary space. ‘Secret bower’ is an echo from Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, 4.5.5, 4.

The reference to ‘yonder’ tower in the 3rd stanza and ‘those’ elms in the 4th one, locates the actual presence of the poet within the churchyard, a pastoral space of stillness but one marked by death and isolation. The narrowness of the graves of those buried, further reinforces this sense of solitariness and isolation, while ‘heaves’ also recalls the physical effects of sobbing in sorrow. ‘Mouldering heap’ with reference to the rough, crumbling quality of the burial forms of these villagers begins the theme of memorialising of the dead, to be developed in lines 37 onwards.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What type of work is *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*? Discuss the purpose of such a poem.

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- 2) What metre and rhyme scheme are used in this poem?

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- 3) What is the setting of Gray’s poem?

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- 4) Write a brief note on the imagery in the opening stanzas of the *Elegy*. Cite at least one example of alliteration, assonance, and transferred epithet used here.

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- 5) From whose perspective is the poem written? Is the speaking voice identifiable or referred to?

- 6) Detail the features of the opening four stanzas that contribute to the expression of sorrow?

2.4 LINES 17-36 (STANZAS 5-9)

- 17 The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
18 The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
19 The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
20 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

21 For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
22 Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
23 No children run to lisp their sire's return,
24 Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

25 Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
26 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
27 How jocund did they drive their team afield!
28 How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

29 Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
30 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
31 Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
32 The short and simple annals of the poor.

33 The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
34 And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
35 Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
36 The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Summary:

The early morning sounds of the horns of the hunters, the crowing of the rooster, the chirping of the swallow from its nest, and the fragrant breezes of this fresh, healthful time are images of vital life that will no longer wake these villagers who are dead and therefore, sleeping in their graves.

Their contented fireside family joys too cannot be experienced by each farmer any longer: of the wife busy in the household routine, or of his children flocking around him with their childish greeting, each one wishing to be the first to climb on his lap and be kissed.

Many were the times these farmers laboured hard at ploughing and harvesting their fields, happily following their oxen and plough, or strenuously working with an axe to bring in the firewood.

The grand and ambitious people of the city should not look down in contempt on the gainful employment of these rural folk, or mock the limited life-experiences

of these simple, poor inhabitants of the village.

They must remember that despite their proud and noble ancestry, and all their privileges of wealth and beauty, they share the common human lot of mortality, which is death.

Critical Analysis:

‘Swallows twitter on the chimney tops’, **Dryden’s** translation of **Virgil’s** *Georgics*, iv, 434; and ‘straw-built citadel’ from *Milton’s* epic, *Paradise Lost*, I, 773, along with echoes from Milton’s *L’Allegro*, describing a lively hunting scene set in the morning, show Gray’s classicism and his debt to these poets. The sights and sounds treated in this stanza represent all that these villagers will no longer see or hear, clearly a ‘catalogue of loss’ (Suvir Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: Ideology and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century England*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 129)

The picture described here of domestic bliss enjoyed by the villagers, despite their arduous duties and responsibilities, echoes Horace’s ‘Beatus Ille’, (translated as ‘happy life’) Epode ii, 44, as also the other image of hard labour done on the ‘unwilling soil...stubborn land’ (Dryden, *Georgics*, i.143-4) and the ‘stubborn plain (Pope, *Imitations of Horace*, Satire II, i.131), adapting the same classical theme of the ‘happy man’ viewed as contented within a limited life.

Note the alliteration of the hard sounds in ‘sturdy stroke’ imitating the toughness of the axe falling on the hard wood. Note also the personifications based on the abstract nouns ‘ambition’ and ‘grandeur’ since both are represented as human figures, while the one ‘mocks’ and the other has a ‘smile’.

These stanzas open for the first time in the poem the oppositions between the country and the city that will serve the poet with the moral function through which he intends to celebrate the village dead. The poet seems to advocate the cause of the rural poor in this warning directed at the city-folk about death as a leveller. However, the stress that Gray lays on ‘the short and simple annals of the poor’ shows his interest less in the idea of death visiting all and rather more on the question of the form memorials take. The choice of the term ‘annals’ to refer to the life-stories of the poor is ironical, ‘as only kingdoms have annals, and so do kings, but the peasantry does not.’ (**Cleanth Brooks**, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, London: Dobson Books, 1947, p.102) In doing so, Gray seems to be elevating the status and the merit of the indigent though industrious villagers. Thereby, as a poet willing to provide deserving memorials to the poor, Gray seeks for himself a new role and authority.

However, the adjectives ‘useful’, ‘homely’, ‘obscure’, and ‘simple’, that praise the villagers, are also rendered ambivalent since this sentiment is voiced by one who himself speaks from the space of the city. This irony and contradiction of social perspective is one of many to be perceived in the poem by an alert reader. Also to be noted is the classicist tendency of the poet transferring his contemplation from the particular object to the general in the course of the poem.

2.5 LINES 37- 44 (STANZAS 10 -11)

- 37 Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault,
38 If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
39 Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
40 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

- 41 Can storied urn or animated bust
- 42 Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
- 43 Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
- 44 Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Summary:

The proud should not blame them if these poor villagers have earned no ornamental tombs like those commemorating rich people whose funerary ceremonies are performed in grand, decorated cathedrals or abbeys accompanied by organ music and hymns of praise.

Is it possible to bring the breath back into their bodies by publicly celebrating the dead through ostentatious, memorial urns or elaborate life-like statues? Is it possible to awaken them to life by singing eulogies and songs of praise in their honour, or engraving flattering epitaphs on their tombstones?

Critical Analysis:

The melancholic and gloomy mood with which the poem had begun has turned in this part to moral indignation directed at the privileged classes on behalf of the neglected lowly dead. These stanzas also expound the theme of loss and the need for memorials. The poet seems to advocate the cause of the poor in the countryside, who are likely to be scorned by the proud city people as being unimportant and therefore, undeserving of being remembered. The absence of any records celebrating the deeds of the rural poor need not be the cause of sending them into oblivion. The fact that their deeds do not have any grand, public dimensions that limits the nature of mourning for them is lamented by the poet in this elegy.

Once again Gray resorts to using abstract nouns 'Proud', 'Memory', 'Honour', and 'Flattery' as personifications in the creation of a kind of moral allegory. The paradox lies in that the actions that are usually performed by memory, honour, and flattery in the case of the rich to call public attention to the dead of their families, are absent for the villagers. These personifications therefore, are being used ironically to show the absence of these personified entities from the funeral forms of the villagers. 'The long-drawn aisle', the 'fretted vault' and the 'pealing anthem' re - imagine in full regalia the funerary forms of the rich taking place within precincts much grander than the ordinary village church.

The moral purpose of this ironic recovery is to point out that the extravagance of these celebrations exceeds what is proper for memorialising. However, embedded within this moral chastisement of the 'Proud' is Gray's nostalgia and regret for the absence of any public memorials for this dead peasantry. Throughout the poem such regret about the absence of a public recognition of the worth of these villagers may be linked to Gray's implicit concern with the uncelebrated status of the poet himself. In their loss is reflected his own social and poetic alienation.

2.6 LINES 45-52 (STANZAS 12-13)

- 45 Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
- 46 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
- 47 Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
- 48 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.
- 49 But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
- 50 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
- 51 Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
- 52 And froze the genial current of the soul.

Summary:

These neglected graves might contain some who had hearts passionate with grand ambitions, some others whose hands might have held the sceptre of power as rulers and emperors, or those whose hands could have produced and written rapturous poetry.

Yet the privilege of obtaining a good education the way it seems a natural right of the rich was denied them by their limited circumstances. All that these villagers experienced were the difficulties of poverty which utterly smothered their souls.

Critical Analysis:

The meditations of the poet make him imagine the buried possibilities of the kind of greatness that the villagers may have achieved, if only the 'ample page' of 'Knowledge' could have been opened for them; in other words, if their social opportunities could have included literacy and education.

'Knowledge', a personification here, is represented as a classical figure holding a scroll, of knowledge and learning symbolised by the written word; a scroll that remains rolled, unrevealed and undecipherable for these 'unlettered' peasants. In Gray's time a Graeco-Roman classical education was the standard fare at the various elite schools and the two universities Oxford and Cambridge, affordable only by the upper classes. In view of its jealously guarded page, although ample, 'Knowledge' is a rather negative figure, much like Ambition and Grandeur. Her 'ample page' or the collective learning of the past is also problematically referred to as 'spoils', the booty seized from a defeated enemy. The word 'spoils' thus carries overtones of hostility and combat, thus pointing inadvertently to the unequal class relations in society that carry connotations almost of a class war.

The rustics are championed as likely to have the 'noble rage', the genius that makes for greatness, if only poverty and their class position had not deprived them of their chances in life.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the positive images used by the poet in describing the lives of the villagers in stanzas 5 to 7? What kind of life did they lead?

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- 2) What reminder or warning is given to the proud and the rich of the cities concerning the poor villagers?

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- 3) Discuss Gray's treatment of the theme of memorials in these stanzas.

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- 4) What might the dead rustics have become if they had got proper opportunities?
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- 5) What are the distinctive personifications that Gray uses in this part of the Elegy? What purpose is served by these?
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2.7 LINES 53-76 (STANZAS 14-19)

- 53 Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
54 The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
55 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
56 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
- 57 Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
58 The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
59 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
60 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.
- 61 The applause of listening senates to command,
62 The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
63 To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
64 And read their history in a nation's eyes,
- 65 Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
66 Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
67 Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
68 And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,
- 69 The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
70 To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,
71 Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
72 With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.
- 73 Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
74 Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
75 Along the cool sequestered vale of life
76 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Summary:

Rarest gems often lie submerged and hidden in the deepest caves of the ocean as also the sweetest flowers bloom and die unseen in deserts, without there being any admirers of their beauty.

In the same way perhaps this village might have had its own rebellious Hampden-like figure who might have defied some despotic local landlord. Among these graves might lie buried, some unrecognised poetic talent like that of Milton, or

a Cromwell-like leader of the people but who, (because of his restricted actions and chances) did not have the guilt of bloodshed (caused during the political turmoil of the Civil War) on his conscience.

Their limited fortunes prevented the obscure villagers from attaining high positions while overcoming barriers in their way. Thus, they did not earn applause in Parliament, nor did they perform historic deeds to bring prosperity to their nation. However, their limited chances also prevented them from committing the kind of crimes that public life often entails. Their obscure destiny prevented them from becoming dishonest and shameless in the pursuit of power. Nor as poets or writers did they have to work their way upwards on the ladder of success by worshipping their patrons with false flattery.

These rustics therefore lived, distanced from the life of dishonourable competition that causes city folk to strive madly after lofty goals. In contrast to the embattled state of the world of public affairs, the villagers' calm-paced and retired existence always continued on its even and straightforward path.

Critical Analysis:

Stanza 14 invests the objects, gem and flower, and their natural habitat with metaphorical force thereby imaginatively recreating this village in the images of the unplumbed ocean or an un-traversable desert. The implication is that the obscure village is equally remote, as are the ocean beds and deserts from the world of action and public rewards and honours.

Gray alludes to Pope's lines of verse where Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* (IV.153-54; 157-58) wishes she had 'un-admir'd remain'd' /In some lone Isle' and 'There kept my Charms conceal'd from mortal Eye/Like Roses that in Desarts bloom and die'. There is also an allusion to Milton's Comus (732-33) in 'The unsought diamonds/Would so emblaze the foreheads of the deep'. 'Purest ray serene' is a typical Miltonic placement of adjectives, one before and the other after the noun.

In stanza 15, historical human figures, 'village-Hampden', 'mute inglorious Milton', 'Cromwell guiltless' are similarly metaphors representing those talented rustics who simply never had the same chances as those celebrated public creators of history. **John Hampden** (1594-1643), English patriot, cousin of Oliver Cromwell, had resisted Charles I by refusing to pay a tax imposed without Parliament's approval; John Milton (1608-74), poet and author of *Paradise Lost*, republican and like Hampden, had been a champion of liberty; Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), served as Lord Protector of England in the years 1653-58, following his Puritan revolt that led to the execution of Charles I.

All the phrases of stanza 16, that describe public actions that might have been performed by the rustics had they not been obscured, depend on the main clause 'Their lot forbade' in line 65, stanza 17. They also could not read their personal actions as commemorated and reflected in the public history; could not 'read their history in a nation's eyes'. Thus, they did not figure in the cultural memory of the nation. This idea connects with Gray's concern with the need for adequate memorials for the dead.

The following part of the poet's argument offers him a consoling thought that their hidden rural existence, 'far from the madding crowd's...strife' also prevented 'ignoble' actions, and contained their potential for evil as much as of virtuous and glorious deeds.

2.8 LINES 77-92 (STANZAS 20-23)

- 77 Yet even these bones from insult to protect
78 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
79 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
80 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

81 Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
82 The place of fame and elegy supply:
83 And many a holy text around she strews,
84 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

85 For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
86 This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
87 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
88 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

89 On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
90 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
91 Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
92 Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Summary:

The graves of these villagers too carry some slight memorials so that they are not insulted by being entirely ignored. These epitaphs and memorials take the form of simple, uneducated words and roughly crafted sculptures, but nevertheless urge the onlooker to gaze upon them, in poignant memory of the departed dead. These gravestones carry basic information of the names and life-span of the dead, and perhaps some biblical moral that teaches the pious villagers about the need for calm in the face of death.

For who can ever readily resign the warmth of life, and pass into the oblivion of death without regret? Each departing soul deserves the shedding of some affectionate tears, and the wish to be remembered stays with us even at death.

Critical Analysis:

These stanzas carry one of the many contrasts presented by the poem. Here, by implication, Gray distinguishes those elaborate memorials referred to earlier in stanza 10 with what may suitably be encountered on these 'mouldering' graves of the 'rude forefathers of the hamlet'. The city pomp stands contrasted with the country simplicity.

The other concern here is with the close-knit, organic nature of the village community. The 'pious drops' that are shed and the awkward verses of the 'unlettered Muse' signify deep, affective ties binding the rural departed to the living villagers, that in feeling and sensibility far surpass the elaborate forms and grand ceremonies of the rich city folk. This evocation of 'pious drops' is suggestive of a warm human memorial that is seemingly far more authentic than any cold marble sculptures, in offering the departed soul a true tribute.

Yet another contrast brought out in this part of Gray's argument relates perhaps to his own melancholic awareness of the value of life vitalising warmth of 'cheerful day' against the 'dumb forgetfulness', the solitariness and oblivion of death.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) With which two objects in nature are the villagers compared? What is the complex effect of these metaphors?

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- 2) Which figures from history are used to point to the lost opportunities of the villagers?

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- 3) What is the positive side of the lack of opportunities suffered by the rustics?

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- 4) What basic human need is recognised by the poet in speaking of the dead rustics?

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- 5) In what way do the memorials of the departed poor of the village differ from those of rich city folk?

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2.9 LINES 93-116 (STANZAS 24-29)

93 For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead
94 Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
95 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,
96 Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

97 Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
98 'Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
99 'Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
100 'To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

101 'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
102 'That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
103 'His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
104 'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

105 'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
106 'Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
107 'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
108 'Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

109 'One morn I missed him on the custom'd hill,
110 'Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
111 'Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
112 'Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

113 'The next with dirges due in sad array
114 'Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
115 'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
116 'Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

Summary:

Perhaps ('haply') some like-minded visitor to this spot might enquire about you, you who write your humble verses to commemorate these neglected villagers. Perhaps some grey-headed shepherd would narrate the tale of your isolated, poetic wanderings around the village, thus:

'We have seen him often at the break of day seeking out distant, open spaces, or stretched out in lonely thought in the shade of a beech tree, gazing into a passing stream. At times in happy self-absorbed mood he would walk about seeming to converse with his thoughts or brood as if care-worn, or troubled in love. One day he was not to be seen at his usual haunts, the tree, the stream or the grassy stretch; another day passed without any sight of him, till his body was seen carried on a bier toward the churchyard. Go closer to that thorn-tree under which he lies, and read the verses on his gravestone, for you know how to read.'

Critical Analysis:

In the lines that begin stanza 24, Gray's mood turns more particularly self-reflexive. This means that he almost seems to think of himself from an outsider's perspective. Thus, quite interestingly he addresses himself as 'thee', treating himself as a second-person entity; someone with whom he has a conversation or a dialogue. The 'me' of line 4 becomes a 'thee'; an externalised self who is 'mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead', thus fulfilling the role of the poet sympathetic to a neglected community and therefore writing about their lives. It is for this group that he writes: 'Dost in these lines their artless tale relate', (lines 93-94).

At this point, we as readers of the Elegy can connect with the complexity of the multiple addressees of his poem. We get an impression that all along in this poem, Gray's concerns have been of forging a self-identification with the innocent villagers who are the subject of the poem. Although he is surrounded by only the graves of the dead rustics, this group are in some sense his audience, the receivers of his views. He clearly imagines himself as linked with them in his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. Although his tale is most certainly not 'artless', it is he who alone is 'mindful' of the deserving of these rustics and therefore treats of their hidden lives, and also incidentally offers them this Elegy as an appropriate memorial.

We also sense that the elegy is addressed to his readers in the learned world mainly because of the erudite style and language in which his whole argument is couched. Most of all we become aware of Gray's strong personal desire to question his own relationship with his poetry. Here he seems to dramatise his social role as a poet in such a way that he stands outside himself in an attempt to understand how the world will see him.

At this point Gray's stance is complicated in relation to his overt self-representation, since on the one hand he authorises himself as being the rustics' champion and yet, on the other hand, his evident socio-cultural positioning and poetic aspirations make him unsuitable for his adopted habitat.

The solitary and hermit-like figure of the nameless poet whom the 'hoary-headed swain' describes is definitely an oddity and a stranger to the villagers. Ironically, it is the person visiting these precincts, the outsider who is imagined by the poet as being a 'kindred spirit', perhaps like those boon companions left behind in Cambridge. Actually, those are the true 'kindred soul[s]' who can read and comprehend his 'artless tale', and appreciate the classical elegiac form and its nuanced poetic sensibility. We note, however, that the swain's speech uses the carefully crafted stylistic forms like alliteration and assonance that Gray's own poetry employs, and is not given the realistic speech of peasants. As discussed in Unit 3 later, the pastoral has always remained an artificial literary convention of classical poetry, and the pastoral poet despite his self-imagined immersion in idyllic environs, fails to live out the realities of the rustics' way of life. Much the same conflicted self-identification with his pastoral subjects is suffered by the over-literate poet figure whose search for a like-minded community and audience among these unlettered country poor results only in a self-defeating pathos.

An interesting embedded allusion in the description of the poet-figure listlessly stretched out under the 'nodding beech' is his similarity with Jacques from Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like It*, who is the prototype of a melancholy man. Such a figure, with his extreme sensibility and his tendency toward moral generalising on death, while he broods from a pastoral retreat on the passing scene of life around him, would have appealed to the contemporary fashion of sensibility.

There is an even more consciously applied self-directed pathos that accompanies Gray's imagined narrative of his own reclusive existence. Thus, the tale of his days spent within this community shows him as unknown, unappreciated by them as a poet due to their 'unlettered' state, followed by his quiet passing away without the 'fond breast' of any kin that he may rely on for the 'pious drops' that the 'closing eye requires'.

However, the self-representation of the poet living an isolated, pastoral existence where he seems disconnected from the community of villagers but assimilated within the environment, turns him almost into a thing of nature, as if he has become an aspect of the landscape of the wood, the hill and heath, the rill and the beech tree. This kind of choice of living a life of retreat works like a positive, moral position to shun the competitive culture of the city, which has been satirised earlier on in the poem.

2.10 LINES 117-128 (STANZAS 30-32 *THE EPITAPH*)

117 Here rests his head upon the lap of earth

118 A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.

119 Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
120 And Melancholy marked him for her own.
121 Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
122 Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
123 He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
124 He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.
125 No farther seek his merits to disclose,
126 Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
127 (There they alike in trembling hope repose)
128 The bosom of his Father and his God.

Summary:

Here lies a youth of humble birth who had no fame or fortune, yet who had acquired much knowledge and learning. He was also melancholy and contemplative in nature. He was generous and benevolent, and sensitive to the needs of others. He was amply rewarded for his goodness by God's blessings and the gift of sincere friendships. Do not seek to examine his good deeds or his faults, but let him rest in hope to receive grace from his Maker.

Critical Analysis:

The last three stanzas that constitute the Epitaph, perhaps appended later by Gray to the main Elegy, have been the subject of much debate by critics as has been the identity of the poet-figure of whom the swain speaks. Some critics hold that this figure might be Gray's friend, Richard West who had died just prior to the writing of the Elegy, and that the epitaph might have been written in his memory.

Another, rather literal minded critical assumption made in the early part of the twentieth century, had given rise to what has been called the 'stone-cutter poet' controversy. According to this idea Gray's Epitaph could not be very well for himself and must be about an impersonal figure, perhaps the local village poet who had been engraving the 'uncouth rhymes' mentioned in line 79, hence the critical reference to him as the 'stone-cutter poet'.

Over time, however, critics have favoured the other idea of the Epitaph being written by Gray for the figure within the poem that may be seen as a composite one, usefully bringing together several impulses, both personal and general ones that serve Gray's purpose.

There is irony in the fact that although in the poem Gray has represented the need for humans to be acknowledged and remembered for who they are even after their death, the Epitaph's 3rd stanza hopes for his actions on earth to pass into oblivion. He rather wishes for himself only the heavenly bosom as the place where he seeks to be fully judged with God's kindness and treated with mercy. Interestingly, Gray echoes *Petrarch's* phrase 'paventosospeme' (fearful hope) used by that poet in hopes of 'grace' or favours of love from his lady (Sonnet 115).

Although a few early critics tended to see the Epitaph as an unnecessary addition to the otherwise fine Elegy, in so far as the poem is a personal elegy there is a positive, hopeful note on which an otherwise melancholy mood of the rest of the poem culminates. Besides, the Epitaph offers Gray's morally upright response to those ceremonious commemorative monuments like the 'animated bust' and the 'storied urn', which had been rejected by him as being too ostentatious. Suitably, the cultural authority of the poet validates the right form of memorializing in this more minimally worded epitaph to himself.

Another positive resonance that is struck is the fact that this Epitaph engraved on his imagined tombstone that the ‘hoary-headed swain’ points to, at least provides that memorial much on the mind of the poet, that which he had lamented as the lack of the neglected dead of the village. The morbid taste and fashion of the contemporary times seems to be played out in the poet imagining his own death, and moreover, writing his own epitaph. The kind of pious resolution of the poet’s anxieties that the Epitaph seems to offer has been considered by some critics as being the gaining of a moral knowledge that leads to a quiet of mind, a kind of unselfish acceptance of God’s will (**Howard D Weinbrot**, ‘*Gray’s Elegy: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 18, No. 3, *Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (1978), pp.548-549).

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Who do you think is the intended audience of this poem? What complexities arise through this ambivalence about the audience?

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- 2) What are the complex ways in which Gray represents the poet-figure in the pastoral landscape of the village?

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- 3) How is the poet described in the epitaph?

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- 4) Discuss some critical assumptions about the epitaph of the Elegy.

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- 5) What is the positive significance carried by the epitaph?

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2.11 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Note: We provide you below with suggested passages where you might find some relevant answers from reading the above Unit. However, we remind you that you need to write your answers in your own words as far as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 2.2.1: Form
2. Refer to 2.2.2: Structure
3. Refer to 2.3 Summary: paras 1 and 2
4. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: paras 1, 2, 4 and 5
5. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: para 1 where the reference to 'me' is pointed out
6. Refer to 2.3 Critical Analysis: paras 2, 4 and 5 where the sounds and the melancholy quality of the scene is discussed. These are all contributory to the mood of sadness that the poet wishes to create in his Elegy

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 2.3 Summary: paras 1, 2, and 3, and Critical Analysis: para 2
2. Refer to 2.3 Summary: last 2 paras, and Critical Analysis: para 4, and Summary of 2.4
3. Read the discussion in both 2.5 and 2.6 to understand what the poet says there about what might the villagers had become if only they had received the benefit of a good education. Now answer the question in your own words.
4. Carefully read 2.5 Summary and Critical Analysis and then answer the question in your own words.
5. Refer to 2.5 Critical Analysis: para 2, and 2.5 Critical Analysis: para 2

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to 2.7: Summary para 1, and Critical Analysis: paras 1 and 2
2. Refer to 2.7: Summary para 2, and Critical Analysis: para 3 and 4
3. Refer to 2.7: Summary paras 3 and 4, and Critical Analysis: para 5
4. Refer to 2.8: Summary
5. Refer to 2.8: Critical Analysis: last 2 paras

Check Your Progress 4

1. Refer to 2.9: Critical Analysis, paras 2 and 3
2. Read paras 1 to 5 of the Critical Analysis in 2.9 and from that discussion draw your ideas regarding the answer to this question. Then answer it in your own words.
3. Refer to 2.10: Summary, Critical Analysis: para 4
4. Refer to 2.10: Critical Analysis: paras 1, 2, 3, and 5
5. Refer to 2.10: Critical Analysis: last 2 paras

UNIT 3 THOMAS GRAY'S *ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD*: THEMES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Image of the poet in society and in Gray's *Elegy*
- 3.3 Gray's Classicism: 'Pastoral' representations of the city versus the country
- 3.4 Disparities of power and privilege and their losses and collateral gains
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- give an account of the changed function of poetry and of the position of the poet in mid-18th century society
- define the nature of Gray's classicism as manifest in the *Elegy*
- discuss Gray's complex use of pastoral images to represent the countryside as a contrast to city life
- comment on Gray's shifting argument on the nature of memorials
- identify the ambivalent attitude of Gray in relation to his social positioning

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Published in 1751, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* became immediately popular, and has remained so till today, although he had not expected to or even wished to acquire any fame by writing it. The changed nature of poetic production and the rather limited reception of formal poetry in the middle of the 18th century in England have already been discussed in Units 1.3 and 1.4. So, although the poets of this period like Gray, Collins, Warton, Akenside, and a few others seemed to be setting up the image of a poet in their writings as a significant and powerful influence in society, the irony remains that in the real, historical world around them, such was not the case. The 'bard' figures that these poets created in their imagined worlds had no relationship with the practical, material world of aristocratic or political patrons, journal subscribers, publishers, and a growing market for the commercial production and circulation of texts that would be saleable, and often for their sensational quality, as for instance, the popular novels, periodical essays, scandalous society memoirs, and the true as also fake travel writings of the period. Due to the rapidly expanding book trade in mid-century England, poets who would not cater to the broadly democratised reading tastes and like Gray did not wish to be treated like saleable commodities, ended up with a sense of powerlessness. They experienced a feeling of their reduced poetic authority within a culture of commercialism where excessive circulation of reading material was considered as cheapening the value of the material sold.

In the next section we shall continue our discussion of the age and examine the image of the poet in the society of the times in the Gray's *Elegy*.

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written
in a Country Churchyard:*
Themes

3.2 THE IMAGE OF THE POET IN SOCIETY AND IN GRAY'S *ELEGY*

In the early 18th century, poets and critics like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift had enforced the dominant authority of classical cultural norms and values through satire directed at the prolific 'hack writers' and 'Grub Street scribblers' for their degradation of literary standards and the prostitution of the arts. However, by mid-century most writers had struck a compromise with market forces and took some pride in their professionalism. 'For many of Gray's contemporaries, the social esteem given to male writers depended upon their proper circulation of texts in the literary marketplace.'

In such a context, Gray's own hesitancy to publish the *Elegy* as also the rest of his poetry, as discussed in Unit 1, was implicitly censured by professional writers like Samuel Johnson, who scorned Gray's 'aristocratic desire to be viewed "as a private independent gentleman, who read for his amusement"'. Gray's rejection of the popular market thus, related both to his personal reclusiveness as well as to the social context. The contemporary dilemma of a poet within an expanding mercantile culture would lead him to explore ways of how to speak with poetic authority to such a heterogeneous audience. These altered social circumstances would result in the poet figure becoming more and more withdrawn, with a tendency to speak from that position of retreat and retirement to a small group and class of individuals, those 'kindred' spirits possessing the cultural advantages of comprehending the classicist poet's articulations.

It is possible to identify within Gray's *Elegy* some of these pressing broader contemporary concerns as well as a particular stance of personal anxiety on the part of the poet-persona which pertains to poetic authority and the poet's vocation as being the voice of the community. Critics point out that most of Gray's poems are concerned with the theme of finding an ideal audience, and being uneasy with the one he actually has. In the sonnet he wrote on the death of his close friend, Richard West, West represents a 'kindred Spirit', the ideal listener Gray desires. But since he is dead, Gray cannot communicate his feelings to anyone else. In other poems, like in this *Elegy*, Gray is cut off by social class divisions from potential listeners. In this poem he does not envisage an audience among the 'Great', for whom he saves most of his moral indignation in the form of the negative allegorical representations, like Ambition and Grandeur. He will not cultivate the figure of Flattery to 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death' among the aristocracy in the city. This group being morally repugnant to him is not the audience he desires. He has much more sympathy for the villagers in the country whose destiny is obscure and whose talents are not allowed to flourish. The tragic irony of Gray's social positioning and literary choices as a learned poet is that the rustics will never be the readers of his verses. As an audience they would be incapable of understanding Gray, as the 'hoary-headed swain' fails to understand the melancholy behaviour of the poet-figure in the poem. Gray's poetic authorship is wasted on an illiterate group who cannot read, as indicated by the words of the swain who directs the 'kindred spirit' to decipher the verses of the dead poet's epitaph. As a cultural community the country-folk are outside the force of his literary authority. His classicist bent of mind and his erudite language will fail to form a bridge between cultures.

The symbolic representation of this thematic thread works even in the opening passages of the *Elegy*, through the imagery as well as choice of words expressing Gray's stance. It is significant in a poem that presents an account of death and loss, that the sights and sounds of the surrounding phenomena in the opening lines are also represented as 'a catalogue of loss' and a deprivation of authority and sovereignty for the brooding poet. We are made to notice the gradual diminishing of the visibility of the sights within the graveyard due to the fading light, as also of the ambient sounds, as the living entities recede or withdraw into sleepy rest. These are characterised by their 'leaving' him in the churchyard, which is the first verbal sign of the poet losing his authority. His later concerns with the contemporary poet's lost audience tie in with the isolation and deprived identity of this poet-figure.

As one of many contrasts used by Gray in the *Elegy*, the twilight/night time scene of the present moment is antithetical to the imaginative recovery of the daytime movements of the peasants busy in their ploughing and harvesting activities. Also represented against the alienation of the solitary poet is the imagined image of the warm and cheerful family, grouped around the 'blazing hearth', nourished by each other's love and care.

The solitude and the idle, meditative stance of the poet in the opening passages of the poem also interestingly stand contrasted with the active, labouring routine of the occupants of the village community, both animal and human, though described in the present moment as tired and seeking their well-earned rest. In the depictions of their daily struggle and activity, the passages render ironic the contemplative idleness and passivity of the poet. Thus, complexly enough, although an important thematic concern of Gray in the *Elegy* is the reinstitution of the poet-figure within a society that has reduced his cultural status; the image of the poet's passive brooding against the active, hard-working rustics' labour is a problematic one.

The gap between the poet and the objects of his poetic and thematic interest, the rural folk, is cultural as well as socio-economic, as these inhabitants of the hamlet cannot act as his audience since they are unable to read his very erudite verses. This contrast is borne out by the words of the 'hoary-headed swain' who, it is implied, cannot read the few verses of the crucial epitaph.

Significantly, at the current moment of the poet's presence within the churchyard it is ironic that the 'audience' that surrounds him 'beneath those rugged elms' is interred in the soil, 'each in his narrow cell for ever laid' in their eternal sleep. Their buried existence seems to have a reciprocal resonance with the poet's own submerged and subdued identity in society. Gray's lack of an adequate readership for his classicist poetry could not have been more poignantly represented than in the solitary poet's dead rural companions.

Yet, despite the obvious gap between the learned poet and the 'unlettered' rustics, Gray imagines himself as linked with them in the fact of his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. Their hidden quality is represented through the images of gems embedded within the unfathomable depths of oceans, and flowers that bloom unseen in deserts. At this point Gray's stance is complicated in relation to his overt self-representation, since on the one hand he authorises himself as being the rustics' champion and yet, on the other hand, his evident socio-cultural positioning and poetic aspirations make him unsuitable for his adopted habitat. Despite this disconnect, however, the attempt to commemorate these unsung, unheroic folk results in the *Elegy* thematically

bringing together the marginalised poet and the marginalised villagers. This play of identity and difference is even more marked by the end of the poem in the sentimental tones of the self-directed epitaph of the marginalised poet.

As discussed in Unit 1, Section 1.3, some of the pressures on mid-century poets were due to certain emergent factors in society. For most of the previous century, writers had been forced to depend for patronage upon the aristocracy or on politicians for the publication of their works. By mid-century, changed social configurations emerged as effects of a dominant mercantile economy, with a gradual withdrawal of the public poet-figure as a result of untenable affiliations of aristocratic and political patronage. This shift was manifest as well in the widening of the readership of an altered and advanced print culture due to increase in literacy at all levels. Identifying closely with aristocratic values and interests, Gray perhaps desired a renewal of ruling-class authority over cultural production, an authority that the market in texts had eroded. Gray feared the destructive effects that the book trade and its mass audiences might have on literary culture, and especially on the survival of poetry, which he considered to be an art that required a liberal education and an informed understanding of literature. Although a new kind of independence was enjoyed by writers of the new emerging genre of the novel, poetry that depended for its proper effects on readership by an intellectually and socially cohesive community began to lose cultural ground.

In such an environment of commodified texts and an expanding readership, an author like Gray, fearful of not being understood may be linked to the pathology of an anxiety of a loss of authority, as may be read within his poetry and in his concern for the passing of an old, poetic time. The figure of the 'bard' belonging to a lost, grand time, with power to move hearts is a romanticised self-reflexive trope that recurs in Gray's poetry.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the changed nature of literary production and reception in mid-18th century England. What were the effects of this alteration on writers like Gray?

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- 2) How had poets of the early 18th century dealt with commercial trends?

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- 3) Discuss briefly how Gray's anxieties concerning poetic authorship and authority are inscribed in the *Elegy*.

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- 4) What complexities and contradictions are evident in Gray's stance of poetic authority in relation to the villagers about whom he writes?

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3.3 GRAY'S CLASSICISM: 'PASTORAL' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CITY VERSUS THE COUNTRY

The most significant element of Gray's *Elegy* is its classicism. This quality is recognisable most obviously in the allusiveness of the poem, which means that it contains verbal echoes of other poets' works in almost every line. In the 1768 text Gray acknowledged some of his borrowings. Thus, apart from phrases adapted and translated from classical poems by Virgil, **Lucretius**, Horace, and others, there are echoes of many 18th century Augustan and neo-classicist poets' verses as, for instance, those of Dryden, Pope, Collins, **Parnell**, Akenside, Thomson, Young, etc. These add to the texture of feeling and meaning in the poem. Gray was also a conscious reader of the older English writers like Spenser, **Shakespeare** and Milton, and was aware that his poems re-echoed this rich tradition of the past. In his use of language too, he consistently strove to use archaisms, or old word forms, and Latinate syntax, or the often inverted structuring of the sentence order as in the classical language. This is done in order to elevate his poetry to the remote regions of the poetic imagination, by evoking a shared voice with these older literary figures. This is one of the reasons for the paradox that although Gray's *Elegy* is perhaps one of the most popular poems in English literature, it was at the same time available only to the learned reader and therefore a contemporary elite audience. Thus, the classicist style of the *Elegy* is evident in that it is often Latinate in diction and syntax, its choice of words and word order being in the manner of Virgil or Horace. Despite this exclusive quality, it hit the fancy of the contemporary reading public.

The form of the verse used in the *Elegy* is alternately rhymed four-lined stanzas, or quatrains with an ABAB rhyme scheme. Its metrical unit is the typically English iambic pentameter (five iambs per line in rising rhythm, with the first syllable unstressed and the second one stressed in each of the five metrical feet). In using this form for poetry, Gray moves away from the more widespread heroic couplet stanza of the 18th century that was common with neo-classicist Augustan poets. This stanza form of Gray's *Elegy* later became established because of its elegiac potential.

The genre of the 'elegy,' and the contemporary literary vogue of writing melancholy 'graveyard' or 'churchyard' poems, has already been discussed in Unit 1, Section 1.4. The setting of the poem in a country churchyard at day end evokes a meditative response in the poet on the nature of human mortality. The poem thus invokes the classical idea of *memento mori* (a Latin phrase which warns all mankind, 'Remember you must die'). This classical theme is considered as having a universal appeal as related to the idea of *vanitas*, or the reminder of the vanity of life in the face of human mortality. As Samuel Johnson commented on this idea of Gray's popular poem, 'The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo'.

An important theme therefore of Gray's *Elegy* is the attempt to derive salutary moral lessons from thoughts of death. In this context, the classical trope that valorises a state of retirement from the hectic activity of life might be identified as constitutive of the representation of the countryside as an idyllic yet comforting domain. The 'graveyard' poems and the sublime odes of the mid-18th century poets created largely imagined worlds, or visions, or meditations set in an idealised landscape, or were reflective of the poet's retirement from active life. This literature of retirement or shared solitude has a relationship of influence to the classical pastoral tradition that dates back to the ancient Greek poetry of Theocritus, to the ancient Latin *Eclogues* of Virgil and to the other Roman poet Horace's second Epode. Closer to Gray's time in the 17th century in England, John Dryden had translated Virgil's *Eclogues*, and John Milton had revived the genre of such a meditative poetry in his two companion pieces, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

Praise of country life, images of rural bliss and descriptions of an idyllic Arcadian life, (also represented in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* in the 16th century) all belonged to a literary convention in which Nature was the subject of an idealised existence that was mostly part of a dream world of a 'civilised', 'un-ruralised' poet. The actual conditions of the rustic dwellers in the real countryside had never been the concern of poets of the early part of the 18th century, writing as they were in imitation of the classical writers. Their poems might be thought of as 'neo-classicised' versions of the pastoral tradition.

Another strain of early eighteenth-century poetry that represents the landscape of the countryside had been the tendency of what was called 'prospect poetry' to show and praise the plenty and prosperity being produced that was contributing directly to the wealth and progress of the nation. This kind of celebration of cultivated Nature in the countryside with poetry like Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713), James Thompson's *The Seasons* (1726-40), and John Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757) had both an aesthetic aspect as well as the material, socio-economic one; on the one hand the pleasing prospect (hence the term 'prospect poem') of a picturesque landscape was viewed as spread out for the eye of the poetic gaze, while, on the other hand, such poems represented the rural industry that led to the burgeoning of trade and commerce of an increasingly imperial Britain. This kind of poetry that celebrated wealth-generating agriculture derived from the genre of the georgic, based on the Latin poem written by Virgil that idealised rural labour, traces of which are evident in Gray's *Elegy* in the image of the weary ploughman in the opening stanzas. With Gray's rather solemn image of a practically depopulated landscape, moreover one that is inhabited by the graves of the farmers, the mood of the poem is quite distinctly antithetical to the positive celebratory 'prospect' poems. Many of these prospects were viewed by the poet from a literal eminence, a hilltop perhaps, so as to provide the gazing eye with dominance over the landscape. This positioning of the poet seemed to be symbolically endorsing ownership of agricultural capital and the landowner's pride in the prosperous landscape. Pastorals and picturesque prospects had also been treated for presenting the virtues of retirement and contemplation, as in John Dyer's early poem, *Grongar Hill* (1723), where the poet sitting on his hilltop retreat contemplates 'the vanity of human ambitions. . . Picturesque prospects here are a source of melancholy moral reflection. Property and politics become trivial in the wider scheme of things' that the poet sees from a vantage point literally above his fellow men, inhabiting a high moral ground.

Thus, in the eighteenth century, representations of the countryside had become

symbolic or emblematic of a generalised yet exemplary space; ethical and aesthetic resonances became attached to this ideal in which a certain nostalgia for a place that was fast disappearing played a significant role. 'A desire to find an essential Englishness in the landscape uncorrupted by commerce and industry only increased as such a landscape became more and more unattainable.... Throughout the century, observers were fascinated by the countryside as a place of retreat, peace and authenticity. Yet they were, perhaps, enthralled by it to the extent that the place that they imagined was disappearing forever.'

In Gray's poem, this nostalgic sense of the countryside becomes further touched with the contemporary mood of melancholia, because of the churchyard setting and the style characteristic of the graveyard poetry. It is significant in view of the contemplative prospect poetry discussed above, that in Gray's poem the poet does not sit above or dominate the landscape, but on a level with the graves that are a reminder of his as well as general human powerlessness. The poetry of the graveyard school chose despair, death, mortality, and the brevity of life as subjects suited to general meditations, with deep undertones of sadness and melancholy. Often, as here, the poems are focussed self-reflexively on the writer. Thus, the subjective tone, the fondness of solitude, and a mood of gloomy meditation marked the poetry of the mid-18th century as distinct from the writing of the Augustans who preceded them. The emotional quality and sensibility of poems like Gray's *Elegy* led to links with the poetry of the Romantics who wrote in the latter part of the century. Gray's poem became extremely fashionable and led to many imitations of the churchyard style.

So, the poem's setting within a 'churchyard', or graveyard adds complexity to the *Elegy*'s use of the pastoral convention of the countryside as an idealised space of retirement and leisure. Thus, while this setting is in keeping with the sententious moralising in vogue, which led the fashionable to choose contrived ruins as architectural elements, and urns, and hourglasses as garden ornaments on their estates, the macabre and gloomy mood evoked by this neighbourhood of the dead seems hardly an ideal situation for the poet. Gray himself had been melancholic all his life, although he had always looked upon this mood as a source of inspiration and wisdom, referring to it as his 'white melancholy'. The heightened sensibility that he clearly connected with this personal trait shows him sharing with the poet-figure in the poem such a seeking out of solitary spaces and an audience among the dead. The irony of this solitary stance and his pastoral withdrawal is that as a poet hoping to fulfil a public role and address an ideal audience, he will fail to form a bridge between cultures. He will forever remain an isolated figure, as the poet-figure in the poem, talking only to himself, 'Muttering his wayward fancies.'

Disaffected both with his own, mercantile bourgeois class, and the glittering sophisticated circles of his aristocratic friend, Horace Walpole (with whom he had earlier quarrelled), the poet looks to the third class of society for solace, represented by the villager, but ironically who will fail to comprehend him. In doing so, he creates what has been called a 'version of pastoral', one which reflects his particular anxieties about poetry and identity. We are rightly warned by literary critics that pastoral is a fantasy, and not an authentic version of rural life. But the anxieties Gray expresses, and the issues he raises in the *Elegy* are real enough.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a short note on Gray's classicism with reference to the allusiveness of the *Elegy*.

- 2) Briefly discuss the genre of the poem.

- 3) What is the classical idea related to mortality that is dealt with in the *Elegy*?

- 4) Analyse the pastoral elements in Gray's *Elegy*.

- 5) Discuss the use of images of the countryside current in the 18th century in relation to Gray's representation in his poem.

3.4 DISPARITIES OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE AND THEIR LOSSES AND COLLATERAL GAINS

This section will look at the representation of the countryside as being an idyllic domain imagined in the *Elegy* by Gray, himself a scholarly and socio-economically privileged writer, becomes compromised by the representation of the villagers themselves: they who have lived out the material reality of life in those retreated and under-privileged conditions. The poet's intuitive awareness and sensitivity to disparities of power and privilege that underlie the surface appearance of the village as a pastoral idyll, and the hidden deprivations suffered by the rustics are addressed from stanza 12 to 21. Thus, countering the value of familial and communal joys of the countryside, depicted by Gray in stanzas 5 to 8, follows the meditation by the melancholy poet on their losses and collateral gains.

The lack of grand memorials for the rural dead may not be too severe a loss for them. They might be bestowed with 'some pious drops' of regret by their family and friends, and perhaps offered 'a frail memorial' or two, or even Gray's own

‘artless tale’ to compensate them for their hidden existence. But the poet is conscious of greater deprivations suffered by the inhabitants of the countryside in the repression of their ‘celestial fire’, their ambitions, the ‘genial current of the soul’, and most of all in the ‘ample page’ of Knowledge being unjustly withdrawn from them. Here, Gray explores questions of what might have been, as well as how not simply in their deaths the rural folk lack adequate memorials but that while living too they lacked an admiring public and a suitable audience of their talents. Stanzas 15 to 18 elaborate on the losses to these people caused by their unrealised greatness.

All of the public historical figures chosen by Gray, to contrast with the villagers’ marginalised existence, are connected to the larger national and very public event of the previous century’s Civil War and its ideas. It must be noted that the oblique reference to the guilt of the historical Cromwell towards his country is offset against the implied positive value of the glorious Milton’s contribution to his country. Thus, if the rustics’ lack of education denied them the creative powers of a Milton, then they also did not fulfil the destructive destiny of a Cromwell. It seems to be a quietist consolation offered for the deprived state of the peasantry, that this obscure destiny of theirs also their ‘crimes confined’.

The felt pathos of their unlettered and uncultured status is once again countered by the compensatory and comforting idea of the collateral gains that their socio-political marginalisation led to. The restrictions of the rural poor also have advantages. Thus, the imagined villager would be ‘guiltless of his country’s blood’, would not ‘wade through slaughter to a throne’, and his obscure destiny meant also the confining or limiting of crimes that are presumed as natural to public life and ambitions.

There are strains of complexity and ambivalence to be noticed, where the poet as a city gentleman seems to both desire the life of the rustics for the values to be found in their simple existence, and yet remaining aware of how those people he speaks about might regret their lost chances of improving their material lot in life. Some of these ideological contradictions and anxieties of the urban poet caught in this awkward social positioning, form the central thematic elements of the Elegy. There is also another accompanying yet embedded contradiction related to the poet’s larger ambitions for poetic immortality that are implied in his desire to write the ‘annals’ of these obscure people, thus while earning poetic fame for himself, also attempting to give the buried villagers a certain degree of continuity in time. Yet contradicting his bid to commemorate them is also a desire to naturalise the obscurity of their lives in giving them metaphorical similarity and identity with submerged gems and flowers in deserts.

The celebrated stanza beginning with the line, ‘Full many a gem’, dealing with the theme of unrealised greatness has received inordinate and extended critical attention over the centuries due to the complicated nature of Gray’s imagery and argument. Note that the ‘purest ray’ of the gem is hypothetical in that the deep ocean caves being dark would not reflect its shine. It is only in Gray’s imagination that the gem’s ‘ray’ would shine as also the villagers’ talents, which the rest of the world has refused to acknowledge.

However, critics have called attention to the problematical nature of Gray’s analogy, since, as William Empson points out, ‘a gem does not mind being in a cave, and a flower prefers not to be picked’, or have onlookers admiring its beauty. By comparing the simple villagers to natural objects, Gray makes their obscurity seem ‘natural’, like that of the gem and the flower. Through this manipulation

of mood and pathos, Gray may be accused of an aestheticisation of the socially created deprivations of the rustics. The beauty of their obscurity is privileged over the ugly realities of economic disparities caused by social inequalities. Significantly, the flower wears a human face: it ‘is born to blush unseen.’

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What, according to Gray, are the deprivations suffered by the villagers in their lives?

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- 2) What are the collateral gains to the rustics linked to their obscure lives that in Gray's opinion are compensations to them?

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- 3) What are some of the ideological contradictions connected to Gray's defence of the rustics' obscurity?

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- 4) How does Gray deal with the theme of memorials in the Elegy?

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- 5) Discuss the complex self-positioning of the poet within the poem.

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- 6) What is the spiritual consolation that the epitaph at the end brings to the poet?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In representing the physical and cultural loss of a whole community in terms of the denial of opportunities and chances to shine in the public memory, the *Elegy* reveals Gray's own imaginative self-identification with people lacking social recognition and importance. The poet-figure in contemporary society, confronted with the threat of diminished cultural authority leading to marginalisation, is more and more anxious about how his readership is likely to enshrine him in literary history. This connects directly to the persistent thematic concern with the nature, proper forms, and limitations of memorials.

It is inevitable that an elegy that laments the death of an individual or, as in this case, an entire community, should evoke the sentiment of memory. Memory is considered as playing a central role in refiguring the loss of the living and their displacement to the life hereafter, or to the regretted 'dumb Forgetfulness' of line 85 of the poem. No one, so argues the sympathetic poet, likes to be entirely forgotten. The educated elite of the city, the 'Proud' have their tombs and trophies; the grandeur of their funerary rites might, or not, deserve the pomp of an abbey or a cathedral with its 'fretted vault' echoing 'the pealing anthem'.

These elite ceremonies, however, involve grandiose and pretentious memorials in the form of a 'storied urn' or even an 'animated bust', which latter ironically underscores their current 'unanimated' state despite their memorialisers attempting to provide the world with a life-like sculpture marking their physical features. Thus, despite the aesthetic and decorative nature, from a public point of view of these grand memorials, considerable irony is piled up through these images in the poem. The implication here is that such public performances of memory involve a falsification of the real figures being lamented. The moral and allegorical force behind words like 'Ambition', 'Grandeur', 'boast', 'pomp', 'Flattery' render hollow these formal memorials, these symbolic 'epitaphs' to the 'Proud'. Significantly, although Gray belongs to this city culture, in describing the elaborate memorials and epitaphs of the rich, he positions himself in critical and ironic contradiction to the fact of his urban identity.

Contrasted with these are the burial forms that the villagers receive in 'place of fame and elegy', that although decked with 'uncouth rhymes' and 'shapeless sculpture', resonate with the simple pieties of 'many a holy text' teaching every one of the inevitability of death. However, despite the natural and logical assumption that we as readers might make about the equalising force of death as coming to all, the poet seems dissatisfied with inadequate forms of mourning. This contradiction is voiced in the pleas for due mourning forms evoked after he speaks of the rustics' sequestered existence, 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'. Such a pressing need for due memorials is seemingly being fulfilled by the sensitive poet in his *Elegy*, that offers the world this 'artless tale' in memory of the 'rude forefathers' of this hamlet. This kind of self-conscious double-ness of perspective, of being both an outsider and yet sensitive to the need to preserve their memory comes of the larger self-reflexive maturation of the poet's own cultural alienation and authorial anxieties.

Adding complexity to his self-positioning vis-à-vis the peasants is the extremely self-reflexive imaging of himself as a poet by Gray in the Epitaph and in the highly personal six stanzas that precede it. Offering a kind of biographical sketch of himself in the improbably literary and sophisticated words of the 'hoary-headed swain', he comes across as a contemplative but obscure genius, besides being a man of feeling in being sympathetic to the sad plight of the villagers:

'He gave to Misery all he had, a tear'. Besides this acknowledged sympathy for the rustics he implicitly declares a singular tendency to wish to live like them, 'far from the madding crowd'. His audience in the poem, apart from the silent, unlettered, and moreover, dead villagers is the sole 'kindred spirit' - an outsider like himself who listens to the swain's narrative of his life and reads his Epitaph when urged to do so.

Thus, the poet rhetorically sets out his imaginative self-identification with these labouring poor who have been alienated, like him 'to fame unknown' due to their poverty, and side-lined by History. In offering himself this exemplary bio-narrative and sentimental Epitaph, Gray seems to reinforce the theme of proper memorials, reminding us of his earlier rejection of those hollow and flattering decorative forms that belonged to a culture given to empty display. There is most certainly an emphasis on the necessity of memorials; the human need to be remembered after death is shared by the poet in such a way as for him to provide a suitable memorial to himself in the form of his own epitaph. But the words of the epitaph are ironically indicative of a piety and a resolution in God, such as to suggest that all epitaphs are superfluous. God is the only true 'kindred spirit', who alone will be the 'friend' who can best comprehend and judge his merits against his frailties. The sentimental self-imaging and the godly pieties to which the poet turns at the end mystifies his alienation from that society in creating for him an alternative identity than one celebrated by public fame; one therefore more suited to the retreated poetic temperament. This self-imaging also 'implies an especially significant role for the poet as the creator of proper cultural narratives, as necessary guardian of the "place of fame and elegy"'.

3.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 3.2: paras 1 and 3
2. Refer to 3.2: para 2
3. Refer to 3.2: paras 4 and 5
4. Refer to 3.2: para 6 onwards

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 3.3: para 1
2. Refer to 3.3: paras 3 and 4
3. Refer to 3.3: paras 3 and 4
4. Read 3.3 carefully to understand the classical idea of the pastoral and the complex changes it undergoes in the poem. Then answer the question in your own words.
5. Read 3.3: paras 4 onwards and then answer the question based on your understanding of this theme.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to 3.4: paras 1 and 2
2. Refer to 3.4: paras 3 and 4
3. Refer to 3.4: paras 5, 6 and 7
4. Read 3.5 to understand Gray's argument related to the use and abuse of memorials and the answer the question in your own words.

5. Refer to the last two paras of 3.5
6. Read the last two paras of 3.5 and write down your own opinions on this question.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 THOMAS GRAY: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON THE *ELEGY*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Contemporary Critical Views: The *Elegy*'s Early Reception
- 4.3 Critical Views on Gray's *Elegy* in the 20th Century and later
- 4.4 Poetic Effects: Gray's Classicism
- 4.5 The Self-Divided Poet
 - 4.5.1 The Poet-Figure in the *Elegy*
 - 4.5.2 'Lyric of Moral Choice'
 - 4.5.3 Analysing Poetic Practice and Cultural Politics
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- begin to understand the original moment of the *Elegy*'s writing, based on its reception in its own time
- appreciate the changed critical perspective on the poem in the twentieth century and later
- address the matter of the poet-persona in the poem: 'the stone-cutter poet' or Gray himself?
- discuss the critiques on the self-divided poet
- comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray's references to city and country discourses
- bring out the philosophical and moral meanings implied by the poet and interpreted by critics
- analyse the socio-economic and political meanings of the poem

4.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already come to an understanding of Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* based on a stanza by stanza close reading and analysis. You have also examined in detail many of the thematic elements of the poem. We have also taken account of the literary contexts and the actual history of the writing of this poem.

We will now turn to the critical history surrounding the *Elegy*, with a view to introducing you to the many ways in which the poem has been read and received. This development of ideas related to it, you must realise, also connects with the changing patterns of reading poetry all the way from mid-18th century to our present times.

Summarised, paraphrased, and excerpted below are some of the many critical studies that this very popular poem has generated. This will allow you to appreciate

more fully the ideological assumptions of the different periods of the poem's reception. This will also provide a richer substance to any questions that you will later address. We hope you will make your own choices of critical elements to substantiate your argument about the *Elegy*. In this regard, the many exercises done as part of your reading of the previous units will provide you with a better perspective on how to tackle longer questions on the poem.

4.2 CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL VIEWS: THE *ELEGY'S* EARLY RECEPTION

The history of the publication of the *Elegy* has already been dealt with in Unit 1, Section 1.4 in which the intervention of Gray's friends like Horace Walpole as part of the poet's elite coterie reminds us of the social context in which the poem was written.

Gray had a peculiarly difficult relation to his culture, both high and low, a difficulty rooted in his own experience of the class system. He distrusted the middle-class mobility that enabled him to prosper. There is in fact a sense of anxiety in Gray about the work world he had evaded. Samuel Johnson called Gray the son of a 'scrivener of London' and describes Gray as: 'though without birth, or fortune, or station, his desire was to be looked upon as a private independent gentleman, who read for his amusement.'

You must take into account that the views of Johnson as a literary critic and commentator of magisterial stature make him an important voice from among Gray's contemporaries, who had an opinion on his writings. As a neo-classicist Johnson greatly valued smoothness and regularity of versification which he found often lacking in Gray's poetry, the Odes more particularly. Gray's interest in what Johnson dismissed as 'obsolete mythology' was also such that led to the disdain of the critic. But it is toward the *Elegy* that in his bio-historical study, *Life of Gray*, Johnson offers some warm praise.

Johnson considered that Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 'abounds with images which find a mirror and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.....Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.' **Roger Lonsdale**, writing in the twentieth century, argues that it 'produces fewer or more complicated echoes in the bosoms of modern readers than in those of earlier generations'. Lonsdale's reference to the complex resonances of the *Elegy* on its readers in our later age reminds us of the different notions regarding how texts must be read and understood that had evolved all the way from the mid-18th century.

Several other contemporary critiques of the *Elegy* relate to the dating of its writing, since there was a considerable lapse of time between when Gray had begun writing it, and its publication in 1751. In fact, he had written a letter about it in June 1750, mentioning it as 'a thing' whose beginning his friend had seen long ago. He concludes the letter by asking Walpole's opinion on it. Among contemporary critics, one argument for dating the beginning of the *Elegy* in 1742 is based on it having been known as a prolific creative period for the writer, yet an alternative theory rests on the fact of the friendship of Gray and Walpole having been re-established in 1746, when he began showing his new poems to his friend.

Gray's borrowings or the echoes of the 'graveyard school' of poetry further connects the beginning of the writing of the *Elegy* with the later date, since a number of poems were written in the early 1740s as part of that vogue of 'graveyard' poetry and prose. This aspect of the poem has already been discussed

in Unit 1, Section 1.4. Most other contemporary critiques of the poem follow the lead of Johnson in remarking on its excessive popularity.

Discussions of the *Elegy* in the 19th century tended to be preoccupied with such textual matters as Gray's sources, the location of the churchyard, and Gray's link with neoclassicism. On textual matters, there was considerable interest in the fact of there being two versions of it; one of them in manuscript form having four stanzas which were later rejected by the poet.

4.3 CRITICAL VIEWS ON GRAY'S *ELEGY* IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND LATER

Closer to our times, critical assessments of the *Elegy* has turned away from mere textual as well as biographical matters. There is a kind of consensus about its complexity, the ambivalence within Gray's poetry, and of the divided consciousness of the poet that lends depth to the meanings that may be derived from the verse. Here we will take account only of some of the more important of the landmark critiques.

4.4 POETIC EFFECTS: GRAY'S CLASSICISM

In the early twentieth century, among the important Anglo-American critics to write in detail about the *Elegy* within the close-reading approach favoured by critics of the New Criticism, is **Cleanth Brooks**, treating of the poem in *The Well-wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. In the chapter on the *Elegy* within this study, titled, 'Gray's Storied Urn' Brooks links the poem to Milton and other poets upon whose previous poetry and Gray's conscious use of the past tradition, are dependent the poetic effects of the poem. He notes:

The *Elegy* is...-like *The Waste Land* - a tissue of allusions and half-allusions. If the materials of which it is composed are 'poetic', they have been made poetic by other poets. (Brooks, 98)

Brooks points out the value of this tradition not so much merely to our own later consciousness of all the references, which we do need for a fuller understanding of its poetic effects. As he insists:

'But the audience for which Gray wrote...and which gave its admiration to the poem was aware of many of them.' (Brooks, 98)

Here, very clearly is the critical assessment of Gray's classicism which is deeply inscribed in this poem. Brooks also writes of how the very conventional materials are used dramatically so as to move the poem beyond the bookish and trite, beyond the 'clutter of lifeless eighteenth-century ornament.' He points out the dramatic and ironic contrasts rendered by even the very conventional uses of the abstract personifications. To quote Cleanth Brooks more fully here would bring out the argument well:

The rural graveyard in its simplicity calls up for the speaker memories of another kind of burial-place, one in which heraldry visibly makes its boast, and one filled with 'storied urn' and 'animated bust.' 'Honour,' at least, it must be granted, is treated as one of the personifications on an allegorical monument:

*Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust...*

But whether we treat the personifications as sculptures, or as terms used in the grandiloquent epitaphs, or merely as the poet's own projections of the pomp implied by the ornate burial place—in any case, they are used ironically. That is to say, they are contrasted with the humble graves of the country churchyard, and they are meant, in contrast, to seem empty, and lifeless. For 'Honour' to possess more vitality as a metaphor would run counter to the intention of the poem. We can put the matter in this way: the more richly and dramatically realised Honour becomes, the more plausible it would be to feel that 'Honour' could 'provoke the silent dust.' Conversely, the more fully dead, the more flatly abstract Flattery is, the more absurdly ironical becomes its attempt to 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death.' (There is, of course, here a further level of irony: Flattery attempts what it cannot perform; but further, it is witless in its attempt to do what has already been done: the ear has been fully 'soothed' already.) Once we see that the purpose of the poem demands that the personifications be used ironically, one is allowed to see some of the supporting ironical devices. They are rich, and some of them are intricate, (Brooks, 101). Thus, such a close reading critical approach treats of the many rhetorical devices used by the self-conscious poet in creating several ironic effects, some of which might seem to turn the irony against himself, a result of what the later critiques consider to be the self-divided quality of Gray's sensibility.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Critically analyse the gains of close reading approaches in relation to the poetic effects studied in the *Elegy*.

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4.5 THE SELF-DIVIDED POET

Critics like **F Doherty**, in '*The Two Voices of Gray*', and **David Cecil** in '*The Poetry of Thomas Gray*', introduced into the mainstream of Gray criticism the notion of two voices, public and private, separating these entities as the real Gray, and perhaps another counterfeit one.

When **Patricia Meyer Spacks** takes up the subject of Gray's poetry and the by-now-accepted view of ambivalence within the poems, she adds her own twist to the idea. She discovers that even in the early work, usually taken as poems of the private voice, 'the poet has exploited structural patterns of alternation, passages of direct statement paired with those of highly artificial and indirect suggestion. The combination of a diction which deliberately conceals with a more personal mode of expression is largely responsible for the impact of these poems.' (Spacks, 1965, 520)

Two voices are heard, then, in the early verse and also in the *Elegy*, but she says further that both voices are deliberately present as an intentional stylistic device to ensure maximum emotional affect. Division is thus considered to be a function of Gray's artifice, a matter of deliberate choice.

In the essay titled, '*Thomas Gray: Drowning in Human Voices*', **Wallace Jackson** discusses the more recent opinions current within Gray criticism of the notion of two voices, public and private, the 'historical' and the 'personal', and the accompanying assumption that the public voice is a counterfeit of sorts, whereas

the personal is the real Gray. He invokes the critique of Spacks in agreeing with her that 'both voices are deliberately present as an intentional stylistic device to ensure maximum emotional affect. Division (here alternation) is thus, tacitly redefined as a function of Gray's artifice'. (Jackson, 363) In other words, Gray employs both a public voice as well as introduces a discourse that involves engaging with his very private sensibility, almost as a dialectic taking place within himself. Jackson goes on to say:

If division is present in the poetry, it is so as a symptom of his relation to an uncongenial age, or the result of his own unfulfilled sexuality, and is manifested in a language dominated by two antithetical voices which may be resolved into some sort of unity through various critical strategies.
(Jackson, 363-4)

Jackson suggests that, 'from the beginning, in Gray's canon, there is a special alertness to what is voiced.' In other words the poet remains conscious of his audience, anxious about, for instance, what 'some hoary-headed swain may say.' He is acutely aware of his commitment to speaking in a public, poetic voice. To invoke voice is also to invoke the memory of its absence ('Mute'). There is the fear, therefore, of the suppression of the voice, through death. 'Or there is the most famous occasion where voicelessness is justified as another example of the law, Nature's edict, the result of which is the diminished and paradoxical thing, "Some mute inglorious Milton".'

Walter Jackson notes that 'Every common reader intuitively feels the churchyard as the centre of Gray's imagination, the place where he pauses in the midst of passage to insist that the vast negative absolute of death renders voice impotent.' In summing up his argument, Jackson says:

Understood in this way, the *Elegy* is an extended meditation on what voice can or cannot accomplish. The legacy passed from generation to generation, from poet to 'kindred spirit,' is the commemorative word itself, and the self is contextualized ("Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse") within other texts ("And many a holy text around she strews,/That teach the rustic moralist to die"). The *Elegy* is surely Gray's most subversive poem, restricting and limiting the power of voice while universalizing the need to speak. All the dead are predecessor voices. (Jackson, 367)

4.5.1 The Poet-Figure in the *Elegy*

In mid-20th century a significant thesis about the poetic persona within the *Elegy* led to the 'stone cutter controversy', an oddly compelling dispute over whether the 'rustic moralist' who appears in the central section of the poem is also the subject of its ending. According to this theory, the poet-spokesman figure, Gray himself, imagines the local 'Stone-cutter' poet and speaks on his behalf in the poem's concluding moments. However, as **John Sutherland**, in his essay titled, 'The Stone Cutter in Gray's *Elegy*' arguing against such an assumption points out:

'...the epitaph does not fit this shadowy stone cutter at all well. For example, what would partisans of the stone cutter do with line 119: "Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth"? This would seem to refer to someone a little better educated than an artisan inspired by "th' unletter'd muse".... It is difficult to imagine that he could have meant the epitaph to refer to a person inspired by "th' unletter'd muse," since he would surely have felt that "Fair Science" had frowned on such a person's birth.' (Sutherland, 12)

Sutherland represents the flaw in the theory thus, and further as supporting his dismissal of the 'stone-cutter' notion cites Brooks:

Cleanth Brooks seems to accept the case for a fictional narrator and explains the shift as dramatic in nature. 'If read in this way, the shift reveals that the speaker is viewing himself objectively, that he has started to think of himself with the same sort of feeling that he has previously expressed about the inhabitants of the graveyard. Thus the shift may be construed as an appropriate introduction to the speech of the 'hoary-headed swain' and to the epitaph itself. (Sutherland, 13)

Hence, clearly dismissing the 'stone cutter' theory of the poet figure at the end of the poem suggesting some local rustic poet, John Sutherland says:

All that can be said is that the narrator and the subject of the epitaph are the same person and that that person is described as an educated young gentleman, not as an unlettered village stone-cutter. (Sutherland, 13)

4.5.2 'Lyric of Moral Choice'

Ronald Crane in his study of poetry titled *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* observes of Gray's *Elegy* that:

[T]he Elegy is an imitative lyric of moral choice rather than of action or of mood, representing a situation in which a virtuous, sensitive, and ambitious young man of undistinguished birth confronts the possibility of his death while still to 'Fortune and to fame unknown,' and eventually, after much disturbance of mind (hinted at in the Swain's description of him), reconciles himself to his probable fate by reflecting that none of the rewards of successful ambition can 'soothe the dull cold ear of Death,' which comes as inevitably to the great as to the obscure; that a life passed 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,' though circumscribing the exercise of virtue and talent, may yet be a means of preserving innocence; and that he can at any rate look forward to-what all men desire as a minimum-living on in the memory of at least one friend, while his merits and frailties alike repose 'in trembling hope' on the bosom of his Father and his God. (Crane, 176)

Myrddin Jones in his essay titled '*Gray, Jaques, and the Man of Feeling*', discusses Gray's self-presentation in terms of the man of sensibility by comparing him with the figure of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. He notes the progression of ideas and their culmination in the moral solace and contentment of the Epitaph:

After having placed his reader in the picturesque setting of the opening stanzas of the poem, and followed this pastoral landscape with reflections on the lives and deaths of the villagers, the poet turns to represent himself, his life and death, in the image of a solitary moralist. He recognizes his fundamental sympathy with the villagers and his similar apparent lack of success in the world. But far from considering this a defeat, he sees it as a life of fulfilment, enriched by understanding (melancholy), knowledge (Fair Science), and voluntary retirement from the fashionable world. '...

'...he wants also to represent to others the image of the poet as a man of wisdom and sensibility. He is thus at one with the villagers being outside the pale of the fashionable, 'successful', insensitive world; but more vulnerable than they in his appreciation of the cost of this exclusion. It is not difficult to see how both Gray and later Romantic artists found in the solitary Jaques an image of this sensibility. (Jones, 48)

This matter of moral choices debated in the *Elegy* is discussed by Roger Lonsdale in his edition of the poem, also referred to from the perspective of the melancholic man. Lonsdale connects the idea to the Epitaph speaking of the poetic self as 'melancholy'. Here he provides a detailed explanation of the term which connects not only with a contemporary fashion of cultivating a particular melancholy stance and disposition, but also as related to benevolence and other social virtues. Thus, he notes:

The meaning of this word is crucial to the 'Epitaph'. Gray does not mean simply that the poet has been made melancholy (=gloomy) because his education made him aware of abilities which he has been unable to fulfil; if that had been the case the 'And' of this line would have logically been 'But'. The favourable sense of 'melancholy', implying a valuable kind of sensibility, though not found in Johnson's Dictionary, was becoming fashionable at this time. The heightened sensibility of the melancholy man ideally expresses itself in benevolence and other social virtues, rather than merely in solitary wandering, though that usually precedes it. (Lonsdale, 1969, 139)

Wallace Jackson also refers to Roger Lonsdale's *Chatterton Lecture* of 1973 which is subtitled, '*Versions of the Self*.' He details Lonsdale's views:

[Lonsdale] finds in the Elegy, 'two selves' ('as if' there were): 'a judicious, normative self, resting confidently on traditional wisdom and values, and a deeper unofficial self of confused and subversive passions which can only be acknowledged as the debate is closed in the concluding lines.' But if the poetry is sponsored by a private self, it is one that cannot be adequately translated into a public presence. Division is re-enacted here as a flight from knowledge, a sort of proto-romantic embowering of the self, and ... Lonsdale's thesis fuses the biographical with Arnold's cultural criticism: 'The perpetual but inhibited preoccupation with the self in Gray's poetry may be explicable simply in terms of the theoretical pressure on a poet of his generation to avoid morbid self-centredness and to express the truths of common human experience.' (Jackson, 364)

Howard D Weinbrot, in the essay titled '*Gray's Elegy: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution*', analyses the poem in terms of, according to him, its seven principal parts:

its initial tone and setting (lines 1-28); the speaker's defence of the poor and insistence upon the futility of riches in keeping one from death (lines 29-44); the difficulty of being successful if one is poor (lines 45-64); the danger of being successful if one is rich or fortunate (lines 65-76); the universal longing for some human memorial, as seen among the poor (lines 77-92); the Swain's report, which indicates the speaker's acceptance of his lot (lines 93-116); and, finally, the Epitaph, in which the speaker's earned resolution is projected in the future, as an emblem of his newly won control (lines 117-128). (Weinbrot, 538-539)

Weinbrot sums up Gray's stance of moral resignation in the following analysis:

Gray's poet learns to tell the tale of the dead around him and to preserve their memory; a "kindred Spirit," perhaps the friend whom heaven has sent, inquires after him and preserves his memory. In any case, the poem finally looks through the grave to eternity, and does so because the speaker has abjured his desire for personal fulfilment -really self-aggrandizement and power-which is as likely to produce merciless as merciful acts. Though he never is a joyful member of the village's life, he uses his active mind and

learns to resign himself to ordinary human affection; he associates himself with his neighbouring, humble people and landscape and, in the process, leaves the definition of his hidden, true character to God. Ironically, through this surrender he also improves his character, cools his moral fever, and changes his focus from choice of life to choice of eternity. The poem which begins as an elegy for the speaker's unfulfilled promise ends as an elegy, now appropriately written in a country churchyard, for a man who learns to accept and praise his limited world and its people, and thus hopes to be accepted and praised in the limitless world of God and His people. The paths of moral choice lead beyond the grave. (Weinbrot, 551)

4.5.3 Analysing Poetic Practice and Cultural Politics

Among some of the most satisfying critiques for readers of Gray's *Elegy* in our time, are those that analyse it by dealing with pressing social, political and cultural questions. These address the matter of the changed nature of poetic production, distribution and consumption of literary texts, and how these questions are formative of the ideological complexities of the *Elegy*. In Unit 1, Sections 1.3, 1.4 and Unit 3, Section 3.1, we have already discussed some of these issues that determined Gray's hesitations regarding the publication of his poetry, and his anxieties related to the mid-18th century poet's reduced cultural authority.

In a historical period that was infiltrated by a money economy, the literary text became part of a process of commercialisation; a commodity to be bought and sold with little regard to its intrinsic cultural value. In this context, Gray's own troubled bourgeois class position with high-cultural aspirations that led him to seek out an elite, coterie audience of like-minded but aristocratic friends begins to have a necessary and logical relationship with his choice of poetic subject. Within this chosen subject of his *Elegy*, he is not only lamenting the obscure destinies of those who are neglected by history, but one in which these country-folk allegorically become linked to the moral and poetic authority of one who endows them with attention and memorialisation. Thus, through the rustic subjects the poet's personal positioning becomes connected with a broader social and political allegory in a transformed commercial culture.

As was pointed out in Unit 3, Section 3.1, the gap between the poet and the objects of his poetic and thematic interest, the rural folk, is cultural as well as socio-economic, and so these inhabitants of the hamlet cannot act as his audience, since they are unable to read his very erudite verses. Yet, despite the obvious gap between the learned poet and the 'unlettered' rustics, Gray imagines himself as linked with them in the fact of his own withdrawal from society and choice of living in a pastoral retreat. This overt valuation of the countryside as an idyllic space while all the time being aware of the necessary cultural and material deprivations of the rustics creates an ambivalent poetic stance that is pointed out by some of the following critiques, each in their own way.

Some of these discussions will be provided to you through excerpts of a few 20th century critiques that have concentrated and commented on many complex socio-historical and ideological emphases within the poem.

The earliest reference to the troubling and contradictory signals given by the *Elegy* is by **William Empson** who wrote in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) that the poem is 'an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas'. He pointed out one stanza in particular, (lines 53-56) that begins: 'Full many a gem....' Of the implications of this imagery, Empson comments:

What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system...This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it...By comparing the social arrangement to Nature [Gray] makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved. (Empson, 4)

Empson further analyses the poetic images in such a way as to point out the bad faith or the quiescent containment of the material inequalities evident between the city and the country existence; as a part of a poetic and rhetorical performance involving mood and melancholy acceptance. Empson is irritated 'by the complacency in the massive calm of the poem.'

To his earlier interrogation of the images in the above-mentioned stanza, he adds:

Furthermore, a gem does not mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be picked; we feel like the man is like the flower, as short-lived, natural, and valuable, and this tricks us into feeling that he is better off without opportunities. The sexual suggestion of blush brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good; this may trick us into feeling that it is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World. The tone of melancholy claims that the poet understands the considerations opposed to aristocracy, though he judges against them; the truism of the reflections in the churchyard, the universality and impersonality it gives to the style, claim as if by comparison that we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death. (Empson, 5)

Thus, for Empson the waste these images represent is 'stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it'.

John Lucas, in his broader critical study, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900* in writing of Gray, agrees with Willam Empson's sense of Gray's reactionary class politics, where the poet while fully aware of the suppression of country ambitions, does not wish for any substantial change for these under-privileged groups. The *Elegy*, he says, 'underwrites an almost entirely complacent account of a "settled" society' and 'refuses to censure tyranny and oppression.'

Yet another important critic, **Raymond Williams**, in his magisterial study titled, *The Country and the City* touches briefly on the situation within the poem:

Gray's *Elegy*, with its churchyard setting draws of course on a traditional commonplace ---

The paths of glory lead but to the grave

--- but there is also a sustained and ambiguous celebration of 'the short and simple annals of the poor.' It is ambiguous because it at once ratifies this remote simplicity ---

*Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way*

--- and admits, with an edge of protest, the social as opposed to the abstracted rural condition:

*But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.*

It cannot really be had both ways: the luck of the 'cool sequestered vale' and the acknowledged repression of 'chill Penury'. But in this structure of feeling, temporarily, the ambiguities of the appeal to simplicity were held and mediated. (Williams, 74)

Hence, the matter of who Gray is truly sympathetic to in the *Elegy*, and whether those apparent sympathies get translated into an authentic affiliation or remain only a melancholy mood, unconnected with political commitments, has always remained an important question in recent critical interpretations of the poem.

In '*Bridging the Gulf Between: The Poet and the Audience in the Work of Gray*', Linda Zionkowski discusses Gray's relationship with his implied audiences, by considering the unusual popularity of the poem:

Part of the poem's appeal no doubt arose from Gray's apparent self-portrait in the closing lines. Given the 'popular preoccupation with the artistic sensibility' that took root in mid-century, readers of the Elegy would most likely behold Gray in the Epitaph that the poet-speaker creates for himself:

*Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own. (117-20)*

An obscure genius and man of feeling ('He gave to Misery all he had, a tear, / He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend' [123-24]), the speaker is distinguished by his sympathy for the dead rustics. Yet in the *Elegy*, the qualities that define the poet's character include not only imaginative identification with people lacking social importance (the speaker eulogises the ploughmen and housewives living 'far from the madding crowd' [73]), but also separation from all human community, including that of the villagers. Alienated by poverty from the 'Proud' whose remains are interred in cathedrals, and by knowledge from the labourers buried in the mouldering graves, the speaker exists apart from the society he describes. His audience in the poem, who reads his Epitaph and listens to the 'hoary-headed swain's' narrative of his life, consists of a sole 'kindred spirit'-an outsider like himself led by 'Contemplation' to the churchyard (95-96).

Gray's portrayal of the isolated speaker seems to voice, and indeed validate, his own feeling of detachment from an understanding public; the *Elegy* mystifies this alienation, transforming it from an aspect of commodified print to a feature of the sensitive poet's temperament. In light of this, the public's enthusiastic response to the *Elegy* understandably embarrassed and annoyed Gray. He believed that readers liked the poem only because its theme fit the current vogue for graveyard verse: it 'owed its popularity entirely to the subject . . . [for] the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose.' Although the *Elegy* seems to have provided him with an attentive audience, Gray found the applause of readers at large to be more humiliating than gratifying; the poem's unexpected success ranked him among the vulgar, crowd-pleasing writers whom he despised.

Charlotte Sussman in her study titled Eighteenth-Century English Literature: 1660-1789 investigates how social, political and economic developments shape a literary period. Commenting on Gray's poem, she 'reminds us that

eighteenth-century writers used the 'sequestered vales' of the poor to work through the problems of poverty and illiteracy that surely plagued urban spaces as well. The geographical differences between country and town often stand in for the socioeconomic differences of a still entrenched class system, even as the countryside becomes a space for personal contemplation.' (Sussman, 108)

One of the most comprehensive and scholarly critiques on the poem, is included in **Suvir Kaul's** book-length study of the writer, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: Ideology and Poetics in Eighteenth-Century England*. Here Kaul takes account of Gray's discomfort with the radically different nature of the new literary marketplace that threatened to marginalize high-cultural and ideological 'aristocrats' like Gray. While studying the interrelations of formal methods and cultural politics, Kaul says that the *Elegy* 'as an attempt to contest the hegemony of bourgeois social and cultural values, and as a record of the textually and historically inevitable failure of such an attempt.' (Kaul, 3)

Pointing to the vocational crisis faced by the poet at this historical juncture, Kaul suggests that the gem and flower images earlier referred to, whereby the rustics' 'sequestered' and neglected status seems to be naturalised, or that they are treated as 'natural' objects that cannot have any market or cultural value, are symbolic of the poet's own loss of poetic authority and value in a world that treats texts as commodity. Hence:

The poem sets itself up as a structure of antitheses: the country versus the city, nature versus culture, the organic versus the reified, those left outside History versus those who would appear to make it, appropriate forms of cultural memory versus inappropriate memorials. It is also about the place of the poet, whose attempt to mediate between these oppositions is at once an attempt to articulate a role for himself as a culturally-vital mediator of such social oppositions. (Kaul, 127)

Kaul also identifies the function of a characteristic 'eighteenth-century Sentimentalism' in the poem, 'the ideology of unpurposive pity', through which the poem 'offers itself both as political, and as the resolution of the political, or, more accurately ...[into] the morally correct emotion.' (Kaul, 141)

He asserts:

The *Elegy* is complicated further by the fact that even though it is the swain who speaks lines 98-116, he is as a ventriloquist's dummy mouthing a part in the solipsistic, tragic psychic drama of the poet-figure. The contradiction between this 'crazed' (self-) representation of the poet-figure, and the far more collected and composed figure of the contemplative poet who meditates on the country churchyard...is obvious, and can easily be mapped onto the divide between the pathetic-sentimental and contemplative-humanist modes.

Finally, says Kaul, we get to the signifier of absolute loss in the poem: the epitaph on the gravestone. And the *Elegy* does not end with a gesture of self-assertion on the part of the poet; in fact,

'the Poet can no longer speak, and can only be spoken of.... [The poem] closes with a rather despairing attempt to claim a heavenly solution/reconciliation for the irreconcilable earthly problems of poetic, cultural, social marginalisation.' (Kaul, 154)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What were the theories regarding the poet-persona in the poem? Comment on critical assumptions about the divided nature of Gray's self-positioning in the *Elegy*.

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- 2) Comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray's references to city and country discourses.

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- 3) Discuss how certain critical perspectives choose to derive philosophical and moral meanings implied by Gray in his *Elegy*.

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- 4) Analyse the contradictions within the poem pointed out by critics who explore socio-economic and political meanings of the poem.

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- 5) Keeping in view the reception of Gray's *Elegy* in its own time, discuss in what way did his contemporaries approach the poem.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have looked at the time of the writing and the publication of the *Elegy*, we have looked at various critical perspectives on the poem through the ages and tried to understand the original moment of the *Elegy's* writing, based on its reception in its own time, appreciate the changed critical perspective on the poem in the twentieth century and later and address the matter of the poet-persona in the poem: 'the stone-cutter poet' or Gray himself?. Also discussed the critiques on the self-divided poet, comment on the complexities of class identities as created by Gray's references to city and country discourses, bring

out the philosophical and moral meanings implied by the poet and interpreted by critics, analyse the socio-economic and political meanings of the poem.

4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Please note that since all the above questions require more detailed consideration and are Long Answer Questions, you will understand better how to answer them if you read all the previous units once more.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to 4.4

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to 4.5 and 4.5. 1 and then answer the question in your own words.
2. Refer to 4.5.1 and 4.5.3 for a detailed understanding of how to address this question.
3. Refer to 4.5.2. Read also the last 2 paras of Critical Analysis in Unit 2 section 2.10 for a fuller answer.
4. Refer to 4.5.3
5. Refer to Unit 1 Section 1.5 for the history of the poem's reception and then read 4.2 to seek a suitable answer to this question.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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